qui tollis peccata mundi

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by wastrelwoods

Summary

Hannibal looks away. Keeps his posture perfectly straight and his breathing perfectly even. "Will Graham is dead," he repeats. The words come out flat, hollow and distant. They do not sound real. "That is a surprise."

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Late Season 3 Canon-Divergent AU: Will gets home just in time to intercept the Great Red Dragon coming to kill his family. Behind bars, Hannibal grapples with unforeseen consequences, and considers the blood of the lamb.

Notes

Honestly this idea just caught me by the brain and did not let go and was inspired by, of all things, an offhanded comment I stumbled over suggesting that it would have been cool and interesting to see Will somehow Become the Red Dragon as a capstone of his character arc which is partly a corruption arc and partly a good-for-her final girl transformation. And I don't know how the hell that would have gone in OPs mind logistically speaking but I did...pursue it conceptually for my self and this is my thought: it's possible! here is one way!

Title SHAMELESSLY borrowed from the Agnus Dei liturgy/prayer, or "lamb of god, who takes away the sins of the world", because Harris and Fuller served me up a juicy allegory and I will be goddamned if I decline to savor it.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> Nothing ever ends poetically. It ends & we turn it into poetry. All that blood was never once beautiful. It was just red.
>
> - *Kait Rokowski*

—

It would be dishonest to say Hannibal sends the Dragon to kill the Grahams with no particular motive.

It is not a capricious impulse, for all that it serves to satisfy a *whim*. Hannibal indulges his whims with clarity and certainty in the action nearly every time. That is not to say he knows beyond the shadow of doubt what the outcome will be. Quite the opposite, truly. He has for many years all but relied on Will's particular knack for making himself unpredictable. It's one of his more charming traits.

He does not anticipate most of the specifics of any possible outcome. Certainly his newest apprentice will do his level best to *save himself*, as Hannibal said, and *kill them all*. Perhaps he will succeed in liberating Will of the woman and the stepchild he has leeched onto in his fatuous posturing at happy families. Perhaps the Dragon's rampage will only claim one or the other. Hannibal could even bear the disappointment if the entire household makes it through his appointed trial by fire. If the aspiring Adversary lives or dies in the pursuit of his Becoming. Only the fire is the point, and Will is certain to rise from the ashes as something spectacular.

Will he delight in the gift he has been sent, Hannibal wonders, or merely *tolerate* it.

Whatever the resolution, Hannibal does not doubt that he will shortly have Will's undivided attention. The thought lingers sweetly in his mind throughout the night. Anticipation thrums beneath his skin, makes him restless. He hardly sleeps.

He imagines longingly the look of righteous fury that will twist Will's visage when he storms in to confront him. The way the anger will make his eyes shine so brightly, gleaming lapis lazuli set in the marble of his face. Recalls the last time Will came to him with blood on his hands and a fever-flush of adrenaline high in his cheeks. Cleaning and wrapping the split skin of his knuckles. How the attempted murder by proxy had become unaccountably more akin to flirtation.

The memory sours only a little, colored by its proximity to the later profound betrayal. But today Hannibal is making new memories.

Will takes such stubborn pride in his attempt to cut Hannibal out like a tumor and sew himself shut with amateurish stitches. They both know he was only ever in remission, borrowing time, that Hannibal will eventually take root again in his blood and viscera and claim him from the inside out. Hannibal *aches* to feel them growing together again, no boundaries left uncrossed.

He takes his breakfast at his work table, looking through the glass barrier of his gilded cage and envisioning the dappled candlelight in the nave of the Capella Palatina, the Byzantine mosaics shining gold. The precise angles of the arches, the smooth lines of the columns. The delicate geometry of the muqarnas ceiling. He takes charcoal to hand to recreate a detail view of one of the apses on a napkin.

Midmorning passes without event, and then noon stretches into afternoon. Hannibal cultivates patience as best he can, threadbare as the skill has become during his sojourn here.

He waits for Will, but Will does not arrive.

At a few minutes to seven o'clock, the security doors at the far end of the hallway slide open with an almost thunderous speed, and Hannibal feels the excitable flutter of the thing with feathers perched in his soul. He sets down his book, marking the page which his eyes have drifted over a dozen times in succession without taking in a single word, and glances up at the same moment he hears a distinctive clicking of heels against the floor.

Alana Bloom enters preceded slightly by a pleasant bouquet of floral perfume and a palpable aura of icy fury. Hannibal watches her mildly as she stares him down, arms crossed and lovely mouth downturned. Beautiful and glacial.

Whatever spark of enlightenment she hopes to glean in her cold study of his face he does not intend to give it to her, though he commends the student's effort to overtake the master. The silent stalemate goes on a minute longer.

Then, something shifts imperceptibly in her demeanor, and a fissure is newly visible in the thick coating of her perpetual coldness. Hannibal's eyes snap to the flaw, and he feels suddenly almost unsteady. He had assumed the ice safe to bear any pressure, and the possibility occurs to him that perhaps there is a danger of a very deep and very frigid plunge ahead. He shifts his weight to the back foot.

When she speaks, her voice is perched on a thin sheet of hairline fractures. "Every time I think that I loathe you as much as it is possible to hate a person, Hannibal," Alana whispers, into the still air between them. "You prove me wrong."

Hannibal offers a bemused flash of a smile. "I have always admired your extraordinary depth of feeling."

"Don't talk," Alana says, sharply. "I can't listen to you right now or I will do or say something that I will probably regret. It would not be appropriate for me to say exactly what I want to

say to you right now. That's not why I am here." The fissures spread, a little of the sharp edges beginning to show through. Ice splintering. She looks, very briefly, like a woman she has not been in a long time.

The metamorphosis is particularly unsettling. Hannibal finds it difficult to adapt his expectations and react to the shifting atmosphere. He clasps his hands behind his back and inclines his head to her.

Alana looks unsteady too. Her breath catches in her chest the way it did when she stood in Hannibal's kitchen and pointed a gun at him, wide-eyed and courageous and foolhardy. "You have not been in contact with your attorney since your trial," she says, finally, after a moment.

Hannibal tempers the grin that threatens to tug the corners of his mouth wide. "No."

She bites down hard on a sound that might be a growl. Alana and her resolute, righteous spirit. He will cherish the fond memory of it when he fulfills his promise to kill her. "You've been talking to the Tooth Fairy," she elaborates.

"The Great Red Dragon," Hannibal corrects. "That would be his chosen title. He described himself as an avid fan of my work. I think the poor boy simply needs to feel that someone is listening to him. We all strive for connection, Alana. The hunger of the human soul to be comprehended touches every one of us. Will Graham understands that better than anybody."

"*Don't,*" Alana says, harshly, a jagged sound from her downturned mouth, and Hannibal goes very, very still. "How *dare* you, Hannibal. Have the decency to keep his name out of your mouth, just once—"

She struggles visibly to reign in control of the outburst, eyes flashing over Hannibal's blank face and falling shut, opening again with a liquid sheen.

Hannibal feels very keenly the threat of the ice shifting and fracturing under his feet. He does his level best to keep motionless. "I think you had better tell me what you came here to say now, dear Alana," he says, in perfectly flat, even tones.

Alana looks away, and takes a slow, trembling breath. "The Tooth Fairy went after Will's family last night," she says, brittle calm in every syllable. "But you knew that."

Even in the strange, unsettled moment, he would be remiss not to press his thumb into the blossoming bruise when the opportunity arose. "I took the liberty of providing his home address," he agrees, with a note of pride. Relishes the answering flinch the bit of goading prompts. Bends forward, urging her on. "Tell me, how many bodies did he leave under the pillow for Uncle Jack?"

"Just one," she spits, and the ice finally splits apart beneath them with a magnificent ringing crack. "Just Will."

The plunge is a shock to his whole system. Hannibal feels the breath squeezed harshly from his lungs, the blood seizing in his veins, the very heartbeat staggering painfully in his chest.

He blinks, and searches for a tell to give lie to the words. Alana gives him none. Tears brim over in her eyes, and he can see the scream perched under her chin by the tremble in her jaw. She gave him the plain truth, or she has spontaneously become a much better liar than he knows her to be.

Hannibal looks away. Keeps his posture perfectly straight and his breathing perfectly even. Suspended in the moment, frozen, waiting for more. "Will Graham is dead," he repeats. The words come out flat and hollow and distant. They do not sound real. "That is a surprise."

Alana scoffs wetly at him, and paces a little before the wall of his cage. "Is it? Gambling with Will's life always seemed to bring you such satisfaction, Hannibal. You should be happy to hear that you finally won the jackpot." Her tone is sharp, but fractured and erratic. Trying to wield a knife against Hannibal by pulling it from her own sucking wound. "I'll admit I assumed your promises were worth more, but I wouldn't say I'm *surprised*."

"I am only human, I suppose," Hannibal answers the accusation, voice still ringing oddly in his own ears.

"No," she muses, sotto voce. Her knuckles are white, curled into a fist at her side. "Never that."

Hannibal finds he cannot quite summon the capacity to move, all consumed in the rigid focus of keeping his autonomic responses in check. He feels carved in stone, heavy and still and cold. "Tell me how," he says.

She doesn't speak for a long moment. Weighing whether it would be more cruel to answer or to hold back every word as leverage. He doesn't know the answer himself. "He ran back to Maine without even stopping to call Jack," she confides, after a pause. "I assume after you said something to spook him."

A warning veiled beneath a taunt. A courtesy for an old friend. Hannibal offers her a terse flicker of a nod.

"His wife and son escaped and are safely under protective custody. Will snuck them out of a back window and stayed behind to keep him distracted, so he wouldn't give chase. Maybe he thought he could win. There was a fight. He--the Tooth Fairy was very...thorough--" Alana breaks off, her face twisting into a mask of pain. "I've seen the pictures. They're difficult to look at."

Hannibal creates a series of them for himself in a moment, vivid paintings in his mind's eye, beautiful and terrible, something of the Sublime in the broken sculpture of Will's body. A canvas painted in blood and cracked bone and the contusions and avulsions of jagged teeth. Empty eyes set with shards of mirror. And yet imagination does not suffice. "Show me. I want to see."

Alana makes another soft, choked-off noise, and turns her face away. "I know you do. Which is why I won't give it to you for free."

In this strange unfocused state, it takes Hannibal a moment longer than he would like to turn his thoughts away from a vision of Will's torn-out throat and grasp her meaning. "Bartering with the corpses of your friends now, Alana," he says, a vein of reverential pride in his still disembodied voice. "You are becoming more and more pragmatic in your Faustian bargains."

"Desperate times," she replies, and he can hear the exhaustion in it.

"Is that payment enough, do you think?" He tilts his head. "To ask me to deliver up a Dragon in return?"

Alana's eyes trace slowly over his expressionless face. There are tear tracks over her cheeks, and visible burst veins in the white of her sclerae. "I'm offering you a carrot, Hannibal." Her voice is thicker now with holding back the swell of grief and anger. "I ought to be implementing the stick. I'm still considering it."

Hannibal is not poised to examine the maelstrom of his feelings in much depth at this juncture, but it does not take a great deal of introspection to find that his sympathies toward his newest patient's blossoming transformation have shifted, somewhat, in light of Will's loss. He thinks about sinking his teeth into the Great Red Dragon's heart while the cardiac muscle is still pumping out blood, and experiences a brief flash of clarity.

"He will call again," he confirms. "I suppose I could suffer to introduce him to you and Jack Crawford." Referring his patient directly into the welcoming arms of the FBI. Hannibal holds back a scoff at the thought. But Alana looks appeased.

"Good." She sets her jaw. "You'll get your pictures when we get the Tooth Fairy."

Hannibal narrows his eyes, but she's already turned on her heel to march back down the hallway and through the security doors again, leaving him behind to prod at the bleeding edges of the cavernous empty space inside of his chest.

He blinks. Takes an unsteady step back, and then two, and seats himself gingerly back at his work table, palms flat against the surface.

One breath in, slowly, and out. A slight rattle on the exhalation, beyond his power to entirely prevent.

Hannibal swallows, and flexes his fingers. He shuts his eyes, imagines a series of echoing footfalls like a metronome to draw him in to the painstakingly recreated pathways of his mind. He walks more freely there.

This wing of the palatial manor that holds his memories is one he does not come through often. The decorations are sparse, the wallpaper faded, the sconces dim. The floors creak underfoot, settling with age. He pauses at the threshold of the last room, and rests a hand on the door. Watches the faint tremor in his fingers as he pushes it open.

Hannibal walks calmly across the room to the antique china cabinet on the far wall, and produces the skeleton key from some intangible pocket. Goes through the deliberate motions of unlocking every compartment, tracing his shaking fingers over frosted glass and wrought

bronze and parquetry. Gently removes a delicate porcelain teacup from the hundreds displayed on the shelves, each more beautiful than the last.

His fingers quiver palpably around the fragile stem of the handle. He examines the painted roses and gold leaf decorating the sides. The scalloping at the rim. The smooth, unblemished surface, carefully lacquered. Hannibal swallows, and hurls it to the floor with a swift, vicious gesture.

The teacup shatters at his feet, reduced to a wash of impossibly disparate fragments. Shrapnel. Hannibal smiles grimly, and does not wait to see if it will gather itself up again before picking up the next in the row.

He empties the cabinet entirely, one casualty at a time, and stands a while longer in the carnage before he can catch his breath.

*

"Ready?" Jack Crawford asks him, and Hannibal blinks back to awareness. "Got your lawyer on the line here, Dr. Lecter."

His limbs are stiff, and his throat is dry and ever so slightly raw, though he thinks he has not made a noise in hours now. He smiles toothily at Jack, eyes half-lidded. "Of course."

It's been a longer wait than expected, the slow march of hours between the Dragon's moonlight slaughter and his anticipated call. Almost three full days elapsed, although Hannibal has found the time passing in strange fits and starts. Something of a cold haze. He has not slept much in the interim.

He remains where he is as the phone is slotted into place, one of the nicer orderlies fluttering about under Crawford's approving watch. Jack stays, too. "Just keep him on long enough to let my team trace the call," he directs. "Don't play any games, don't try to run me around. I don't have the time or the inclination to put up with any of it today, okay? Just do your part to get me what I want, and Dr. Bloom will get you what you want." He steps in closer, leveling a stern look through the glass. "Fuck with me, and you will get nothing. That sound fair to you?"

Hannibal feels something distantly like fondness at the way he throws his authoritative manner around with such familiarity, as if he forgets he is not speaking to a subordinate. It's the only way dear Jack seems to know. A comfortable pattern for him to fall into. "Entirely so," he replies, with a hint of amusement.

"Well," Jack says, hesitates a moment. "Good. I'll leave you to it."

He's retreated around the corner and nearly to the outer door before Hannibal calls after him, "Jack."

There's a telling silence that suggests Jack has halted mid-step.

"I meant to offer my condolences," he says, a parting volley. His voice rasps a little with the lingering dry ache in his throat. "On the loss of your sacrificial lamb. I know it must be a difficult blow for you, to see one more of your good men fall in the line of duty. To be helpless to prevent it."

Another extremely telling silence, in which pause Hannibal imagines Jack is reminiscing about nearly choking the life out of him, or perhaps heaving him off that palazzo balcony.

"I always had a bad feeling Will Graham was just as much your man as he was mine, Doctor," he says, in a strained voice. "But I'm not the one who sacrificed him, am I?"

Hannibal takes the blow on the chin, content to have had his attention, to have caused him a moment of incisive pain even with the implement pointed at both ends. He runs his tongue over his teeth and tastes blood.

He takes up the phone.

"Hello," he offers, waits for the low rumble of the Dragon's voice in his ear. "I expected your call to come sooner. What a busy boy you have been."

"Is this Doctor...Lecter?" Asks someone else entirely, from the other end of the line.

Hannibal pauses, reflects on the gentle flicker of surprise. He is so rarely surprised by anything these days. The novelty nearly brings a smile to his face. "Indeed."

"You're Dee's therapist," she says, with a slightly relieved sigh. "Francis, I mean. I'm sorry, I really don't mean to pry, I just wasn't sure what to do, he's not answering my calls, and he hasn't been at work. And I found your number on a napkin in his coat pocket, had a friend read it out for me. He left it with me and he hasn't come back for it," the woman on the end of the line reiterates. "Not for a week. I didn't know who else to call."

"And you must be Reba," Hannibal murmurs, thoughtfully. The Dragon formally identified but disappeared beyond his reach, his *woman clothed in sun* cut adrift. Jack will like this. "I've heard so much about you. A very singular influence, you've had on our Francis. He talks of very little else."

"Do you know where he is?" Reba prompts, with an eagerness that speaks to a good deal of desperation. "I mean, if you can tell me. Have you spoken to him? Is he...if he didn't want to see me any more, I would understand. I just want to know if he's safe."

Hannibal wraps one finger around the cord, idly, and imagines it as a garrote. The bruising slide of wire through flesh. "He'll be coming to kill you any day now, dear," he assures her, in a gentle voice. Smiles blithely at her stunned silence. Lets his professional warmth trail off into a hiss. "Unless I beat him to it, of course. I expect the FBI agents listening in will want a word with you now. Don't let me detain you, Ms. Reba. *À bientôt.*"

He drops the receiver back into its cradle with a satisfying click, and steps back. Bemusement wars with a vague impression of disappointment. It is, unexpectedly, not half so satisfying to take control of the board when the game continues to change over and over. Not now he finds himself playing without his best opponent.

The unaccounted sharp ache in his throat returns, and Hannibal swallows around it. He can still taste the phantom bitterness of blood on the back of his tongue.

Perhaps he has been cut adrift, himself.

*

Alana takes his books and his drawings, strips the cell bare of everything but the necessities and then takes a few of those too, ruthless and needling. Hannibal had assumed he would not be hard pressed to give her a reason to fulfill her promise. Better to let her get the urge out of her system. He is not especially inclined towards the use of his little luxuries at present.

The straightjacket and the mask make him itch terribly. Plastic chafing at the ridge if his jaw, breath hot on his face. It quite exacerbates the itch in his throat, raw and stinging and more insistent every moment.

"Do you enjoying plying the stick as much as you anticipated?" he wonders aloud, to distract from the strand of hair plastering itself askew on his forehead, caught by an errant bead of sweat.

Alana looks him over with a perfectly apathetic anger. She's foregone her customary bright lipstick today, and her hair is down in a low chignon. Very subdued, in fact, in more or less every ridge and buckle of her usual armor. "I'm removing your distractions," she says, cooly. "I hope this can be a time of reflection for you. You can adjust your focus towards that hollow, dark pit you pass off as a soul, and see if there's anything buried down there that can masquerade for remorse."

"Careful, Alana," he rasps. "I would hate to think you were lapsing in your professional objectivity at this late hour."

One corner of her mouth curls upward, and her eyes shine dark. "Will got away from you," she says. "He *survived* you, and moved on with his life, and found a little happiness and peace. And when he came back to ask for your help, just once, you tried to take it away again and got him killed. He was my friend, Hannibal, and now he's dead. I'm willing to make it personal."

"A dear friend," he remarks evenly, as she plants a hand on his work table and the orderlies wheel away the last of the shelving. "I always considered Will to be something more like family, myself."

She turns away. "Take as long as you need to finish up here," she says, pointedly, to the staff working behind her. The coat slung over her arm is heavy dark wool. Appropriate attire for an internment, the long wait in a chilly graveyard. "I'm heading out. Don't want to be late for the service. Oh, Hannibal," Alana adds, a feigned afterthought. "I almost forgot--Don't waste your time writing any more of these. I'm not going to deliver them." She produces the letter of condolence he'd penned earlier, addressed to the elusive Mrs. Graham and her son.

He'd kept the correspondence succinct and very nearly polite, without preamble or appendix, not wholly expecting it would reach her but interested nevertheless in pursuing the possibility.

> *Full fathom five thy father lies. Of his bones are coral made. Those are pearls that were his eyes; nothing in him doth fade, but doth suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange. Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell: Ding-dong. Hark! now I hear them—ding-dong, bell.*

From the curl of Alana's lip, his well-wishes are not to her taste. Tasteless, even, he amends, as she tears the envelope in half and drops it into a waste basket by the door.

Hannibal smiles thinly through the muzzle strapped to his face. Cruelty becomes her, of course, but she doesn't wield it with especial prowess.

The outer door shuts with a fatalistic clang. Then it is only him left, with his indignity and the company of the dead.

He lies back, eyes falling shut, and lets himself in to his old office. It's comfortable, going through the familiar motions of setting his coat on the hook and his keys in the top drawer of the desk. Reorganizing the papers sitting on top with a brief shuffle. If the room he occupied were anything more than a construct of his imagination he might open his mail, next, and check his appointment book. One of the half-finished drawings Alana has just confiscated from his cell sits on the corner of the desk, by his pencils and the scalpel he uses to sharpen the points. A study of the *Ospedale degli Innocenti*.

Hannibal traces his fingers over the raw edge of the cold-pressed paper, and sighs. Casts his gaze up to the mezzanine, and finds that he is not alone.

Will's back is turned as he picks over the volumes on the shelves, browsing idly though he must have the titles memorized almost as well as Hannibal does. Filed away in his eidetic memory. He laughs low in his throat when he senses Hannibal's attention turned on him.

"Guess you found me," he says without preamble, half over his shoulder and half to himself. "You didn't spend much of your free time the last three years chasing afterimages, but I've been here. Whenever you were ready to look."

Hannibal takes in the curling wisps of hair at the back of his neck, the solid frame of his shoulders, the gentle rasp of his voice. He's compelled by the exquisitely beautiful forgery. "I preferred to anticipate our meetings to come," he explains. "Contemplate our future, rather than revisiting ghosts of the past. Moving forward. Like you."

"Not like me," Will denies, and finally turns to make a sliver of his profile visible to Hannibal. He traces every ridge with starved eyes, venturing out from the safety of the desk for a closer look. "I didn't think about you at all. I replaced you, Hannibal. You were eminently replaceable."

"Cruel boy," Hannibal chides him, but he feels his stomach gnaw with fierce hunger even for this, for a barbed word and a cold dismissal. He feels a pang to imagine that no one might ever have the artistry to wound him half as keenly for the rest of his life.

Will leaves his perusal of the bookshelves and alights down the ladder to meet him on the ground floor. Hannibal offers an arm, and shivers at the imagined press of a hand against his elbow. His skin feels scorched with the ghost of the touch.

Those bright eyes search his face, and shine with a sliver of a smile. "You want to know whether I would forgive you this time."

Hannibal finds his hand moving to caress Will's face before he can think better of it. Brushes the pad of his thumb over the stubble on his cheek. "I will admit to some curiosity." There is a raw sandpaper quality to his voice which he cannot account for.

Will's gaze pierces through him, eyes dark and serious, jaw tight. "Couldn't offer you absolution even if I wanted to, Hannibal. I'm gone. They're throwing the dirt over my coffin right now."

"I am aware," Hannibal says, perhaps a little too flatly. As though he cannot help but take umbrage with the concept.

It would be the appropriate moment, probably, for the specter to pull away, leave him cold and angry and unsatisfied. Contradictory, capricious, wonderful Will only steps closer, tracing a hand over his waist, so near he should be able to feel breath against his cheek. "I'm never going to forgive you," he says, a whisper into Hannibal's ear. Lips brushing his cheek, only a little incline of his head and he would be pressing a kiss there. "You made sure of that. I am never going to come back to you. Memory is all you have left. You will look for me everywhere and you will never find me, Doctor Lecter, not anywhere except for *right* here--"

Will breaks off with a sharp, agonized gasp that raises all the hairs on the back of Hannibal's arms. He looks down and notes, distantly, how white his knuckles are around the handle of the scalpel. How red the gush of blood as he drags the blade through Will's stomach. Not a careful and calculated reprisal, like the scar whose path he retraces, but a pure act of senseless violence.

As with every time before, there is no helping the next instinct. He wraps his arms around Will, holds him close, tugs him against his chest to shudder and grit his teeth around shaky, whimpering breaths. Hannibal clutches at the soft curve of his spine, runs a red hand through his hair, makes a gentle shushing sound as Will's lifeblood spills out between them. In the heightened, distorted lens of fantasy, there is enough to overflow a river.

Will's chin tucks into the crook of his neck. "H—annibal," he chokes. "Why—"

"Easy, darling," he murmurs in a daze. "Easy now—"

"Why do you do it?" Will presses on, cold where he clings to Hannibal, all his warmth rushing out onto the floor. "Why br-break the teacup? You always drop it, some...*ggh*....fundamental impulse makes you destroy it, when you know. It won't just...glue itself together again, you're gonna be...*unsatisfied*—"

"A flaw in my nature, I suppose," Hannibal says, considers his tone and realizes with some surprise that he is apologetic. Either the scalpel or the embrace is an apology.

Will laughs, shaky and agonized. "It's a...paradox." Hannibal steps away half a hairsbreadth to take his face in his hands again, leave a bloody smear high on his cheek. "Like hand rearing lambs. Love them and—And lead them to slaughter."

"I love you, Will," he says, with a bright, rough-voiced fervor. The hand not already pressed to his cheek tucks the edge of the scalpel under his chin and draws across his throat, opening jugular and carotid.

Will doesn't answer him, only closes his eyes and tips his head back. Arterial spray falls over Hannibal's face like rain.

He does not taste blood. He tastes salt, even when he opens his eyes again to the cold white interior of his cell. Reaches up and finds a telling dampness on his cheeks.

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Memory carries with it an inherent fallible impermanence, and so it should take only a thought to undo the damage he has wreaked at least in the privacy of his own mind. But Hannibal finds himself either unable or unwilling to turn back the clock, each time he slips back into the hallways of his memories. The china cabinet remains strewn across the floor in a scattered vision of carnage, no matter how long he lingers by the open doorway, waiting for the teacups to piece themselves together.

He returns to promising shared rooms, looking over his shoulder and keeping his footsteps light. Waits in the candlelit chapel, in the Uffizi Gallery before the Botticelli, in the kitchen in the afternoon sun, and he is desperately alone in every one of them.

He returns to the office, only once, and spends the evening in quiet contemplation of the carnage he left behind there, too. Will's exanimate form does not do him the courtesy either of vanishing from its place on the bloodstained Persian rug or of re-assembling itself from a silent, lifeless sprawl. He does not putrefy, only lingers in perpetual new deadness, a symbol of the thing and not the thing itself, which is beyond his reach, which is in the ground, becoming dust. A *memento mori*.

Hannibal's cell is barren of the temporary trappings of leisure, few distractions, even the dull visitors skewing few and far between. Retreating inward proves equally inadequate as a means of diversion.

Will is gone. He is left behind. He struggles to conclude where, exactly, that leaves him.

They are conjoined, even now. Inosculation was a beautiful and exquisitely painful process, gradually incising and pruning and winding himself so closely around another person that the borders between them began to blur and fuse. Until they were all but inseparably joined, shared minds and syncopated heartbeats. All that sweet, slow torment pales to the lingering decay of a rootstock grafted to a dead scion.

There is no point separating himself from what he has left of Will. He would have to carve himself almost in half. He would bleed out trying.

He does not imagine that he will long survive the alternative, anyhow. Hannibal can see it in his hollow face when he catches his reflection in the glass. Something flat and empty behind his eyes. Something withering, something rotting. Failure to thrive. Pale creeping atrophy seeping in by sluggish degrees.

Because fate so enjoys her little jokes, in the midst of one of these lingering bleak moods Hannibal is given the happy news that the Red Dragon has just made worms' meat of Frederick Chilton.

A smile pulls at the corners of his mouth, springing from the depths of a well of mirth he was beginning to think had run entirely dry. Across the glass border, Jack Crawford remains stonefaced. "Couldn't have happened to a nicer fellow," Hannibal crows, staying supine on his cot rather than engaging entirely with the conversation at hand. "Did he suffer terribly, do you think?"

"We set up an interview with Freddie Lounds," Jack says, flatly. "To bait Dolarhyde out of whatever bolthole he's been stowed away in. He'd get defensive, go after the byline, and we'd be waiting to close the net. Dr. Chilton was only involved to provide a couple quotes for the profile. Verisimilitude. He shouldn't have been a target, not with Freddie there to draw fire."

"Ms. Lounds has the luck of the devil," Hannibal says primly, thinking regretfully of the many times the reporter has slipped the noose. "Or perhaps you have simply pulled the same trick one time too many, Jack, relying on Tattlecrime to bait your traps. It's made you predictable."

"You know, I don't really give half a damn if this son of a bitch sees me coming," he answers, brusque. "Matter of fact, I want him to know I'm coming for him. What matters is I'm gonna catch him up sooner or later. I already know my next move. What's next for *you*, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal blinks, and shifts upright on the cot, angling to peer at Jack with cautious interest. "You came here to ask me to bait your next trap."

"He didn't bite when I tried Freddie. He went for Chilton out of spite, to make a point of letting me know how much he wasn't interested. But he'll bite for you, Doctor, if he'll bite for

anyone. You're the best shot I have."

Hannibal watches him in contemplative silence. Jack is moving in familiar patterns, but the Dragon has made himself oddly unpredictable of late. His metamorphosis has taken on new dimensions, made him more difficult to anticipate or control. The man who called Hannibal before would not have hesitated to make an example of Freddie Lounds, whether or not he spotted the wire of the snare. As a matter of pride.

It would be a straightforward leap from admiration of Hannibal's *oeuvre* to a professional ambition to surpass him. Many rising artists come into their own and discover a new motivation to eclipse the works that first inspired them. Devour Hannibal and take on his power. Common enough, but a surprising conclusion for Jack Crawford to draw nonetheless.

"You seem very certain of that," he muses, at length.

Jack offers him a grim ghost of a smile. "Yeah, well, I've been reading your fanmail." He reaches into the pocket of his coat to produce an evidence bag, waving it pointedly between them. Hannibal stares.

"I suppose you must monitor my correspondence, but must you continue to confiscate my post without offering me a chance to see it for myself?"

Jack narrows his eyes. "I assumed you would just eat this one."

Hannibal hums, noncommittally, and tilts his head at the severed tongue in the bag. "I did aspire to, some day," he muses. "Seared and complimented with a nice Rioja, I thought. That would be Frederick's, then?"

Jack sighs, long and low, and stuffs the confiscated organ back in the pocket of his coat. "We stage a transfer," he narrates, shortly, "Move you out in a van. Light on security, just light enough to make the Tooth Fairy feel like you're in reach. He goes after the convoy, we close the net, and you get all your privileges reinstated for good behavior. I finally get this son of a bitch off the streets, so I can sleep at night. Sound like a deal?"

"It sounds," Hannibal says, archly, "Like putting my life in your hands, Jack, and I'm not convinced that would be at all in my best interest. Look at what's befallen poor Dr. Chilton, under your tender mercies."

Unspoken, he considers leveraging the other recent death attributable to Dolarhyde, but knows that Jack is giving equal consideration to the same. The lamb they both sent to slaughter. An equal measure of regret poured out for the both of them. In the end each party merely stares the other down through the glass, waiting.

Will would have had to do nothing more than look him in the face and say *please*, he thinks, and he would have taken it as payment enough.

Hannibal looks past Jack and through him, considers what it might be to meet this Dragon face to face. Blood for blood. A chance to pay him back with interest for what he took, or to

meet an end much more satisfying than to remain and waste away where he is now, fulfilling a promise he made to a man who has no further need of it.

"Alana promised me something, before, in exchange for helping to snare the Dragon," he offers, stepping back, breaking the silence. "Grant me that, and you'll have your bait."

*

They bring him the photographs only a day later, enclosed in a thick manila envelope twined in red string. Gift-wrapped. The orderly working the morning rounds slides the package in on the side of his breakfast tray, and Hannibal leaves it there as he sips at the sour coffee and picks at a plate of dry eggs and toast that ought not meet the legal qualifications of being named bread.

Hannibal picks over the knot of the string idly after the rest of the tray is emptied, and re-evaluates how close to the end of his rope Jack Crawford must be, to acquiesce so fast. Another full moon approaching, the bodies piling up. He'll be keen on the idea of adding Hannibal's name to the book of the dead, or the chance of abruptly shortening the lengthy process of Dolarhyde's trial and conviction by some stray bullet in the ensuing chaos. Some neat arrangement to tie up all his loose ends.

Jack probably likes his odds very well, with this plan he has fixed up. Hannibal has put away the habit, now, of presuming to know which way the cards will fall in advance. Uncertainty is considerably more liberating, in its way.

With a soft exhalation through his nose, Hannibal slides open the envelope and arranges the photos across the surface of his work table.

Strange, to finally put an image to the abstract concept of the home Will made after he left Hannibal behind. A substantial paradigm shift from the whitewashed porch and drafty windows of his little house in Wolf Trap. A paradigm shift from how Will knew this place, too. From a homely cabin to a burnt-out shell. Hannibal takes the time to engrave the dimensions of the place into his memory, piecing together a mosaic of blackened timber and broken windows and trails of blood soaked into the floors.

He lingers on an overexposed view of the kitchen, a dark viscous splatter across the backsplash and over the countertop, a cabinet door dangling from one straining hinge, the unmistakable pooling red stain on the hardwood. It's easy to superimpose an image of Will already fixed in his mind's eye, wild-eyed and pale, slumped against the cabinets and hissing *I can see you now*. Wounded and cornered and triumphantly revealing the quiet way he had insinuated himself into Hannibal's soul and twisted it around in his hands long ago. *I already changed you the way you changed me.* Prying a thin victory from the bloody jaws of defeat.

There is no victory to be found here, only the stain of spilled blood dark on the ground.

When his eyes flit from the empty kitchen to the first image of the body posed in the living room, next, there is a moment of euphoric disbelief.

It isn't Will after all, he thinks, with a heart-wrenching swell of reckless joy, suspended in the space between the burst of lightning and the rolling heave of thunder. It's only a trick of the light, or an elaborate misunderstanding, or some twisted game Alana and Jack conspired to meddle with him--

The irrational conviction recedes as swiftly as it came on, as Hannibal studies the charred corpse. It was a mistake to expect the body in the photographs to *look* like Will. Less recognizable as a man and more akin to an abandoned marionette. Cut free and left to sprawl in an artless tangle of strings and splinters. Something twists sharply in his stomach.

The Dragon left him a warped shadow, mutilated beyond recognition and then set alight until the skin went black and shriveled. Mirror glass shining in the eye sockets, a familiar bloodstained button-down and a glint of gold band on one finger, but in all other aspects an almost featureless croquis in Will's borrowed clothing. It strikes Hannibal as an especially profound waste.

He would have made Will into a masterpiece, if he had been offered such a chance. Pierced him through with arrows like Saint Sebastian, posed him gracefully as Cabanel's *Ange Déchu*, cradled by dark wings, sightless eyes fixed in eternal fiery sorrow. Mounted him on a throne of antlers, the points jutting through him at wrists and ankles. No visible wound but the stigmata. Something breathtaking and beautiful. Angels would have wept at the sight of him.

Or, perhaps, in a more private display, he would have done his level best to consume Will whole. To honor every part of him to the last drop of marrow. A reversal of a transubstantiation, a final consecration in the total transformation of his flesh and blood to bread and wine.

"*Hoc est enim corpus meum,*" he murmurs, brushing the tips of his fingers reverently over the glossy surface of the photo. "*Hic est enim calix sanguinius mei.*"

This burnt offering the Dragon made for him, the way he *changed* Will, is an indignity that makes Hannibal's blood boil.

"I'm curious," Alana muses, her voice echoing cooly off steel and glass and slick tile. "How it makes you feel to see what you did to him. Whether you've discovered any innate capacity for remorse."

Hannibal's lip twitches faintly in annoyance at the interruption. "I find I have a curiosity of my own, Dr. Bloom."

She steps out of the shadow to look him in the face, and inclines her head, sharply.

"Fashioning me into a lure for the Dragon, that was entirely Agent Crawford's plan." It has the air of a question in a way that leaves little room for contradiction of the answer they both know very well. "And you agreed to it?"

Alana blinks. "I'm more than willing to trust Jack with your life, if that's what you're wondering. We hold it in equal regard." She sends him a wry look that readily communicates that the pair of them have had a bottle of *Chateau d'Yquem* saved away for years to uncork on the occasion of his death.

"And what about my safekeeping?" Hannibal prods, breaking his gaze away from the photographs on his table to smile thinly at her. "So few doors between the wide world and the inside of a transport vehicle, compared to this little room. Anything could happen, and you remember very well the promises we have made to one another."

Of course she has considered the possibility. She doesn't flinch at Hannibal's grin, either, brave girl. "Jack's too good a fisherman to let his bait slip," she says, after a cold silence. "He'll keep both eyes on you, and probably a laser sight or ten. Maybe that won't be enough, but maybe it will. I know you're going to come after me the first chance you get, Hannibal. I never let myself forget that."

He sees the truth of it in her face, hard and cold. Alana has done well for herself, with her borrowed years. A Verger heiress wife and a Verger heir son, a grand estate and a beautiful family and a fortune large enough to blow through for the next eighty years and never reach the bottom of the coffers. A charmed life that she moves through like a ghost, waiting sleepless and frozen in the dark of every long night for the devil to crawl out of the woodwork and drag her down to the brave death she bargained for.

Hannibal almost prefers to let the anticipation of his promised visit linger endlessly between them. It will very nearly be a shame to put an end to that long watchful terror when the moment comes, but his hands are tied. To do otherwise would look appallingly like clemency, and then where would he be?

And, of course, she did take away all his books. That was extremely discourteous.

The Dragon, on the other hand, has given no comparable indication of understanding that Hannibal is going to hunt him down one fast approaching night and tear him to ribbons. Slowly, savoring every precise cut and crack of bone. Make him plead for mercy until his body is deprived of the means to continue. Keep him back from the precipice of death until the brutal message has a chance to really sink in, that Will was not *his* to change.

It's difficult to know what he means by presenting Chilton's tongue as a wry trophy, casting himself still in the role of the Chesapeake Ripper's eager, troubled secret admirer. If there was an accompanying note, Jack made no mention of it. Perhaps he does not grasp the fatal miscalculation he has made. Or perhaps he knows and does not fear the consequences. Hannibal's jaw pulses with the grit of his teeth. People do not pay the same heed to a caged panther that they might when they later spy the chatoyant glow of its eyes in the dark underbrush, keen-fanged and free of the bars that used to hold it in check.

Perhaps this beast that Francis has transformed into by a baptism of blood and fire considers itself incapable of fear entirely. Hannibal will make him know its sharp, acidic sting before the end. He will hold his beating heart in hand and feel it tremble like a frightened bird, then wring out the last frantic convulsions of life.

He hopes Francis Dolarhyde knows what is coming for him. Hannibal is very much in agreement with Jack on that count.

"You are both of you excellent fishermen," he agrees, at length. "Have the good sense to handle your lure with care, Alana. The hook is as sharp as it has ever been."

Alana stares back at him with implacable calm fixed on her pretty face. "We'll see."

*

A kind of unshakeable certainty settles onto Hannibal's shoulders, as the moon waxes again and the last preparations are made, that when he leaves the confines of this small white cell on Jack's errand, he will never return to it again.

The idea does not perturb him. He has spent very little of his three years of captivity in this particular room actually inhabiting it, preferring to pass the time elsewhere as often as he could. And besides, a prison cell is not the sort of place one misses when it is gone, even one so erstwhile well-furnished and comfortable.

Still, a part of him had always entertained the hope that when he left this place behind, it would be in Will's company.

Hannibal goes to visit him in the only way he can seem to manage it, during the last long night of his confinement. He sits with his *memento mori*. He does not allow himself to mind the thought of wrinkling his pressed trousers by kneeling too long on the rug in his office. He does not linger on the fact that the body in his lap is neither pliable nor warm enough to suggest the faintest sign of life. He runs his fingers through dark curls and keeps his quiet vigil. Pauses, before he stands to depart, and presses a soft kiss to the cold marble of his temple.

"In search of Hector now, of him who slew my friend, I go," he recites, in a soft toneless whisper. "Prepar'd to meet my death when Jove shall will it."

Will's corpse does not stir to hold him to the antique promise, but Hannibal fancies that the slack face contorts itself into an indistinct flicker of a smile. He lingers a moment longer, until the harsh buzzing of the morning alarm pulls him away.

The outfitting of his armor comes only a short while after that, the by-now familiar routine of buckles and straps and a pair of shiftless security guards standing by with stun batons and a glint of fear in their eyes. He curves his mouth into a polite grin through the heavy plastic muzzle, and does not speak a word.

He runs one fingernail over the turn of the seam of his jumpsuit sleeve, and shuts his eyes. Plucks out the first measures of Saint-Saëns *Danse Macabre* against the rough canvas, where the straightjacket pulls his arm in tight against the opposite shoulder.

The opus continues in the heavy booted steps of the guards who escort him to the van, the click of a half-dozen locks on the door, the squeal of the tires and the low purr of the engine. He counts the measures in focused silence, awaiting his cue.

It comes early, soon as the convoy reaches an empty stretch of road a little earlier along the route than Jack had anticipated. A gentle popping noise and a rattle and a hiss, a minute before the van shudders and swerves to an abrupt stop along the shoulder. Hannibal meets the eyes of the police officer seated across from him, and raises a brow. From the front cabin, there's a distantly audible oath as the blown tire is discovered. The attentions of both attending officers snap away to the muffled sound, and Hannibal moves, bending and twisting to uncurl himself from the straightjacket with a precise wrenching pull that tests the flexibility of his rotator cuff and the durability of the whole socket. Not quite a dislocation, but a considerably painful strain of the joint. A necessary evil.

"Stand down!" One of the officers shouts, panicked, reaching for their weapon. Hannibal intercepts the motion, lunging forward and wrapping the linked sleeves of the jacket around his neck.

There are more quiet popping noises outside, and the screech of tires, as the Dragon picks off members of the police escort with more shots from the silenced pistol Hannibal presumes he wields. He is preoccupied with wrestling both the pair of officers at a time and ducking and weaving around the cramped cabin to keep out of reach of the stun batons, but Hannibal means to keep his appointment.

It takes a difficult series of twists and pinches to undo the sleeve buckle without the use of his teeth, but he manages at length to find the leverage whilst kicking one of the gentlemen hard in the chest to wind him and keeping the other locked in a stranglehold. He smiles the same wide smile as before when the muzzle at last unhooks from his face, and it does not look so polite the second time.

Hannibal dispatches them swiftly and shrugs off the jacket, licking the blood from his teeth.

He tucks one of the fallen stun batons under his arm for safekeeping and busies himself with unbolting the locks on the door, one after another. The last gives out with a ringing crack when he takes a step back and rams the door with his already injured shoulder.

His convoy is scattered at odd angles across three lanes of traffic, various members of Jack's escort either sprawled bleeding over the ground or taking cover. Hannibal strolls toward the nearest abandoned cruiser with curt businesslike steps, and makes good progress across the short distance before any of the officers spare him a passing glance.

"Lecter!" one shouts, and "Stop!" and he circles to the driver's side door quickly enough to dodge the potshots fired in his direction but too late to entirely avoid the spry young cadet who takes it upon himself to fling his whole body at Hannibal and send them both crashing to the pavement in a sprawl of limbs. Hannibal twists, but the officer's hand closes around his hurt arm instead of the dominant one, in a stroke of beginner's luck. He grits his teeth against the flare of white-hot pain, and loses a further second's advantage catching his breath. The stun baton scatters out of reach.

The officer who flung himself at Hannibal scrabbles on top of him and tugs his arm back in an attempted pin that comes dangerously close to a success, then jolts in surprise and falls lifeless to the pavement. Blood blooms from the hole the bullet tore through his neck.

Hannibal spares a passing glance along the trajectory of the silenced shot and stops when he reaches the upturned face of the Great Red Dragon, standing impassive and silent on the far side of the stretch of highway, shielded behind another cruiser, weapon still raised. A black mask covers everything of his face above the thin, lopsided smile that twists his mouth and the barest flash of a set of jagged teeth. He watches calmly while Hannibal rolls away the corpse and brushes himself off, unlocks the door and climbs into the vehicle.

Across all the distance and past the tumultuous orchestra of gunfire and crackling police radios, he feels the undeniable pull between them, like a thin string tied around one of his ribs, tethering them just below the heart. Understands without looking back that where he goes, the Dragon has no choice but to follow.

Not here, he thinks, as he drives away. *Not yet. You and I require something a little more private.*

*

He has not been back to the house on the cliffside almost since he acquired the property. Even when he had a ward living there it would have been injudicious to make visits too frequently. To leave inconvenient stretches of time without an alibi at a moment when he was often required to account for his whereabouts with little notice. And she could manage on her own, most days, the clever girl, had become quite self-sufficient and independent in her second life. Perhaps not independent enough, in the end, although a certain degree of reliance was admittedly Hannibal's design.

He imagines the shadow of Abigail drifting quietly along the abandoned halls. A flight of fancy borne of uncharacteristic wistfulness. Only a very few people have reached a hand through the tangle of briars that grow dense around Hannibal's soul to brush its surface, freely splitting skin on the sharp thorns, and all are dead and gone now. By his own hand, most of them.

The house is three years empty of the last echoes of its occupant. Hannibal sheds his bloody jumpsuit and leaves it in an ungainly heap at the foot of the guest bed, retrieving more fitting attire from storage.

He hears the rumble of the second car coming up the gravel drive, and makes his way back to the kitchen. Retrieves a bottle from the rack at the back of the walk-in pantry, and turns to find his visitor has, true to pattern, already let himself in.

The Dragon regards Hannibal with a detached, shadowy silence and no particular expression on his masked face. The gun is in his hand, but idle, resting at his side, less an immediate

threat than an afterthought. It's strange. Hannibal wonders what it is he's waiting for.

"A Romanée-Conti Pinot Noir," he says, conversationally, weighing the corkscrew in his hand with consideration. "Once declared *velvet and satin in a bottle*." He tilts the glass in his guest's direction, magnanimously, expecting to be brushed off, but the masked man steps closer and takes what he offers with a leather-gloved hand and a twitch of his lip.

Hannibal raises a brow and pours a half-measure for himself. Allows the wine a moment to breathe, and watches the man he is here to murder, who watches him right back, impassive as a stone wall.

"To your becoming." he toasts, brings the glass to his nose and assesses the layered aromas. Drinks. Finds the flavor complex, but incomplete, with an unwelcome bitter note. Perhaps he was too hasty with the first sip, but he has been three years out of practice. "We spoke before only in a mirror dimly. Now we are face to face, it seems the opportune time to know one another more fully."

The Dragon's stony expression does not alter, but he radiates a pleased warmth with only the angle of his shoulders and the tilt of his chin. He brings his own wine to his lips and seems to consider it for a long moment, savoring the bouquet without tasting. Watching Hannibal and the swirl of dark red through glass. There is something about his posture that tugs on the string and pulls sharply against his ribs. A feeling of recognizing.

"I expected us to converge on more level ground," he begins, without quite meaning to speak. "But we are unbalanced. Killing me would make you feel intensely powerful, whereas I expect killing you would make me feel nothing at all." The wine is dark and oaky and tinged with the bitter film of blood dried in his mouth. The timbre of his voice sounds...bruised, to his own ears. "I envy you your exultation."

Something shifts in the Dragon's face, below the mask, and Hannibal can feel his eyes searching without being able to meet them. He steps forward, sets down his glass on the counter, tilts his head, and drops the gun to the floor.

It is as good an invitation as any.

Hannibal lunges, trusting to his dexterity as he reaches to grasp by the collar and drive the corkscrew up under his arm. The Dragon bares his teeth. Half his mouth stubbornly droops at the corner but the other turns up in a savage grin. He steps to the side and deflects the blow with a soundless laugh.

They are terribly evenly matched in their pas de deux. The Great Red Dragon is not perhaps as daunting in stature and musculature as he might be, but there is something quite wild and ferocious guiding the movements of his body. He anticipates every blow with an unexpected prescience, like he understands what Hannibal will do next the moment he decides it.

Hannibal gets an arm around him to slam him bodily against the edge of the counter, rattling their abandoned glasses. He kicks out and tugs Hannibal down by the injured shoulder. Hannibal slides him into a chokehold and gets a deep, jagged bite to the meat of his forearm

that breaks his grip. The Dragon laughs again, a throaty sound in it this time, the joy cracking through his wall of self-imposed silence. Hannibal stumbles over his feet.

He feels it as a building of pressure behind his ears, then, a soft but insistent tunneling of his awareness to only the span of inches between himself and the Dragon, and then less, and less. Hannibal grits his teeth and sweeps out with his hand to send his half-drunk vintage flying in a dark spray of burgundy. "What," he hisses, flatly. Would not ordinarily be one to waste breath on words that could be better put to winning the fight, but if the numbing tingle in his extremities does not mistake him, the point is swiftly becoming moot.

How it came to be drugged he cannot guess, and yet there is unmistakably a sedative in the wine Hannibal just opened and decanted and drank. It would have been tampered with before he arrived, some dark shadow moving through the empty house as Hannibal led his pursuer down the winding roads to safe seclusion, knowing that he did not know this place already and he *could not have--how did--*

The Dragon closes a hand around his throat, as he falters, and *lifts* him, by some miracle of stubborn will, pins him against a doorframe opposite the plane of wide windows that look out on the patio and the churning wine-dark sea beyond it, and Hannibal sees the strangest thing in the distance, there. The infinitesimal red eye of a camera, staged to take in the scene. He narrows his eyes, and sees the Dragon step deliberately to place his back to the lens, draw something out of an inner pocket of his jacket. Subtle, carefully choreographed motions. Curiosity and the lethargic pull of the sedative induce Hannibal not to resist, to remain pinned in place and observe with half-lidded eyes as the man in front of him bends and rips open the object in his hand with a flash of jagged teeth. Tacky, coagulated blood sprays between them, pours in a thick dark river over the hollow of his throat. The masked man makes a guttural, pleased hum, and empties a second pint bag with the same deliberate staged motions.

Hannibal looks down at the obscene display of gore painted onto his chest and neck, and reaches up a hand to touch it, inquisitive. The Dragon catches him by the wrist, and slowly, with an almost teasing air, puts a gloved finger to his lips.

From the perspective of the distant eye of that camera, Hannibal intuits, it must look every bit as if he has just had his throat torn open by the monster's teeth. A make-believe murder. He sucks in a startled wisp of a breath that fills his lungs with the cloying smell of rust, and then goes absolutely motionless, because *there is something else beneath it.*

A subtle, unassuming ghost of a scent, half-smothered under a cloud of blood and sweat and leather and wine. The acrid burn of cheap aftershave, nearly faded.

It is no trouble at all to slump forward in a boneless heap, gasping like a dying man. He would be hard pressed to react in any other way. A name shapes in his mouth without sound or air, and he watches the Great Red Dragon's cockeyed red smile bloom wide and dangerous as the roiling ocean. A smile he should have recognized sooner.

His opponent leans in close, conspiratorial, as his vision spins and spots with black. "I wanted to surprise you," Will murmurs, low and soft in his ear.

Hannibal reaches for him with sluggish desperation, and plummets headlong into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god when I write Hannibal's POV i always feel like I should be keeping footnotes it just feels right to have him narrate in metaphor and symbol and lofty references and associations he makes no attempt to contextualize. That's Dr. Nietzschean Trout for you! Anyway ask away if I miss anything but what comes to mind is the letter he writes to Molly, which is a passage from *The Tempest*—ironically also about a character who is secretly not dead!—he also quotes the liturgy of communion while looking over the crime scene photos (hoc est enim corpus meum, hic est enim calix sanguinius mei / this is my body, this is my blood), and then during the last scene in the office he quotes from Book 18 of the Iliad, Achilles mourning the death of Patroclus and deciding to rejoin the fight. I couldn't immediately find a translation that both seemed like one Hannibal would favor and phrased the line in a way that worked for me but I, noted non-classicist, did my best.

I know I have not answered all the questions I set up here that is WHY you and me are gonna see each other here again for pt2: What The Fuck Has Will Graham (Legally Deceased) Been UP To?! It's in the works give me a little time and encouragement in whatever form you prefer

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Will Graham's death, and what comes after.

Chapter Notes

OK when I said 'There's a chapter 2 and I'm working on it now' I did not anticipate meaning a full calendar month but...maybe I should have. Maybe I should have guessed that would be the case.

NOT just a B-side this is fully a new, second chapter with different characters and events picking up where the last left off it just also happens to be structured as an extended flashback, kind of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a bottle of whiskey in the trunk of the Chevy and a dead man at our feet
staring up at us like we're something interesting.
This is where the evening splits in half, Henry, love or death. Grab an end, pull hard, and make a wish.

- *Richard Siken, "Wishbone"*

—

Will pads silently through the breathing shadows, leaves the window cracked after Molly and Walter so the squeak of the frame sliding shut doesn't draw attention. Shuts his eyes and lets the silent house speak to him with noise and clarity.

Rounds the corner of the stairs and comes face to face with the beast. A looming dark silhouette against the black. Something with teeth and wings.

Will just manages to reach up and twist away the barrel of the gun as it goes off, escapes the quick and brutal design of a slug between the eyes, but he knows he will lose the ensuing fistfight almost before it begins. He manages only glancing blows in trade for precise, bruising strikes that fracture ribs and burst capillaries and knock the wind out of him, leave him staggering and gasping and on the back foot. Even when he fumbles for and retrieves an

old hunting knife tucked into a boot, makes his next blow the one to draw first blood, the stolen advantage only lasts a moment.

The man in the stocking mask bares jagged teeth at Will in an animalistic snarl and crushes his hand hard in the slammed door of a cabinet, loosens his grip by force and then buries Will's own blade deep into the side of his face.

His vision flashes white with pain, and again when the knife is drawn out and stabbed into the already stiff and scarred join of his shoulder. The Dragon clamps jagged teeth down in the meat of his trapezius hard enough to bruise, twists the knife before he pulls it out, and the tear of muscle and gush of spilled blood rip a harrowed scream from Will's throat. An animal cry of pain that echoes like a howl.

He scrambles again for control of the weapon and only succeeds in scattering it across the floor and out of reach before he's lifted and pinned bodily to the countertop, head cracking against the granite, gloved fingers seizing him by the neck in a vicious, efficient stranglehold. Knock all the air out of him and stop him from drawing breath again. Methodical compression of the cervical blood vessels, an expert confidence to the placement of his hands. Another point in favor of past military experience, not that he'll get a chance to add that point to the developing profile.

Cortisol and adrenaline flood his blood in dizzying waves, and Will understands that he is seconds from unconsciousness and death with an almost clinical fascination. His mind offers up a lightning-fast streak of associations and explanations and a decades-old undergraduate lecture on asphyxia and its sequelae. Images of cadavers with the livid bruising of strangulation on their cold grey skin. The borrowed sense memory his imagination offered up a dozen times of recreating the crime, throttling and feeling the life drain out under his fingers, feeling powerful, feeling merciful, feeling savage and wild and free--

He stops scrabbling against the hands crushing his throat and slams his knee up into the solid mass of body holding him down. Earns himself a half-second reprieve as the grip loosens and uses it, not to fill his lungs but to lunge forward and reach *back*. His bloody fingers wrap around a fistful of hair, grip tight around the ridge of a jaw. Will drags him in close, the other man's bowed head tucked against his chest, and then wrenches as hard as he can, feels the crack of bone under his hands, hears the echo of vertebrae snapping.

The blood rushing in his ears recedes, and leaves a cold silence.

Will gasps for air like he's breaking the surface of a lake. His lungs burn, his limbs ache and tremble and try to drag him back down into the sucking void. The phantom pressure against his airway lingers after the removal of the obstacle. Half his face feels like it's on *fire*.

He gags, folds down to the floor under the collapsing weight of a body that isn't his, shuddering, a live wire of adrenaline and a sinking stone. Turns his head to spit a tacky mouthful of blood and something a little more solid. Probably a tooth. Apt parting gift for the Tooth Fairy.

A choked-out laugh shudders through his chest, rattles in his throat. Air hisses out through the gash in his cheek. Will throws his head back and shoves the corpse away. *God.*

Lies there for a moment longer, splayed out on his back on his kitchen floor in a pool of blood that's more his own than not. Repeats, again, the refrain that's played over and over in his head in the seconds-minutes-eon since the fight for his life began. *Fucking Hannibal*.

He coughs, feels another gout of blood run down his chin. Reaches up to wipe it away and thinks about just lying here on the floor until someone finds him. Thinks about following Molly, calling the cops, calling Jack. Thinks about skipping all of that and getting on his feet and carving out the Red Dragon's heart to bring straight to Hannibal raw on his mother-in-law's good china. Alana would love that, Will marching into her office with a goddamn trophy and a jagged hole in the side of his face.

Thinks about how *tired* he is, bone-deep exhausted from years of struggling against the current when all he wants to do is sink into the stream and let it pull him down where he knows he belongs.

Will heaves himself up onto hands and knees, and stares into the vacant, empty eyes of the dead man beside him. The mask has slipped uselessly back to leave his face exposed—the face of the man from the archives, with his aquiline nose and square jaw and harelip scar.

Ding dong, he thinks, a little giddily. *The Dragon's dead.*

He has the strangest impression that they somehow traded places, in those last desperate seconds they spent locked in a fatal embrace, each reaching back for the other.

(*You were his final enemy. How will you honor him?*)

Will staggers to his feet, and goes to work.

It's a fundamentally imperfect copy, which makes the switch harder to sell. They aren't wildly different in height, in weight, but the Dragon has muscle mass. Strong enough to toss Will across the room like a sandbag. Strong enough to lift him off his feet with one arm around his throat and the other driving a knife into his face. He's missing distinctive identifying marks--the recorded history of violence scribed into Will's skin--and worse, he bears some of his own. The old scar of the cleft in his lip. The tattoo all across the span of his back.

There are solutions, but they won't hold up to scrutiny. Will endeavors to eliminate the need for scrutiny. He will address the rest as it comes.

He dresses the Dragon in his clothes, mars the surface of the canvas to cover the absent scars. Carves away at him with deliberate, meticulous motions. Bags up the Dragon's possessions, dons his blood-soaked clothes, wrests the jagged false teeth from his slack mouth. Pauses, and then puts them to use himself. Waste not, want not. Leaves a impression deep in the meat of one shoulder to mirror his own. He mars the face thoroughly enough to obscure any possibility of ID by dental record. Feels lightheaded with the careful brutality of the work his hands are doing. Or maybe the strangulation and blood loss.

Swallows, and slips the gold wedding band off his finger. Slides it into place on the dead man's hand. Feels sick to his stomach with how easy it is to leave it there. Without even an apology.

Will has a lifetime of expertise in abrupt abandonment and painful, spontaneous separation. Performs field amputations on his relationships with practiced ease. Leaves every party without saying goodbye. He was always good at cutting ties.

He drags his palimpsest to the proper place, laboriously recreating the body of work he's pored over obsessively all month, leaving a winding trail of blood black in the moonlight. Sets the mirror shards in the eye sockets, and then watches his reflection as he douses the whole room with gasoline. Strikes a match.

Will walks out into the night, and looks back at the far-off blaze of the cabin from the shade of the trees on the far side of the lake. Feels, incongruously, like he's as safe as he will ever be, staring out at the distant light shining over still waters.

*

The first six hours after his death, Will just drives.

The car with the counterfeit plates was parked a mile down the road, pulled over on the shoulder. The neighboring farmhouses and cabins all keep to themselves, wouldn't notice a strange car sitting empty on the roadside for a few hours overnight. The Dragon didn't bother trying to hide it. Will finds the keys in the pocket of the leather jacket he stole.

Blood clots and congeals and scabs over, pastes his shirt to his skin and dries tacky in his stubble. The shoulder throbs with a steady pulsing ache. There's comparatively less pain in his face, only a distant hot numbness.

He doesn't have a destination in mind, only a vector, which is to put every possible distance between himself and the bridge that he just burned. Going south is easier than north, drifting down the 95 in the bright haze of the moon-drenched night. States slide from one to the next in a feverish swirl. He doesn't know which one he's passing through when he finally turns off the highway.

The sun is creeping over the horizon with a red gleam like an old ember. He washes as much blood off his face as he can in a bathroom sink at the next rest stop. Scrubs it off his hands. It sticks brown under his nail-beds. Stares at his slashed-open face in the mirror and feels shattered and transparent. Like a broken window, the night air blowing frigid and lonely through a frame full of nothing but empty space and sharp edges.

The bleary-eyed motel concierge doesn't spare him more than half a glance, lets him pay with a fistful of cash and a wry, embarrassed grin. He falls onto the bug-bitten mattress and sleeps through most of the day.

Wakes with a pounding dull headache and old blood dried sweet-bitter on his tongue. Drags himself across the fleabitten carpet under the flickering light of the bedside lamp to start reassembling the shards of himself.

Hannibal would probably balk at the quality of his stitches, tied with fly knots in fishing twine and cleaned and dressed with nothing but the contents of a first aid kit swiped out of a maintenance truck bed. Would look the work over with quiet disapproval, cluck his tongue and shake his head and sigh so softly Will would half think he was imagining it. Hannibal can go to hell, or alternatively come sew Will back together himself next time he feels the urge to put a hole in him to prove some kind of point.

Will almost feels the phantom pressure of gentle, sure hands brushing the ridge of his jaw, the pad of a finger over the temporomandibular joint, a thumb resting at the corner of his mouth. A soft press against the purple-red bruises on his throat, mapping out the spiderweb of broken capillaries, taking the measure of his pulse. Grounding touches, solid rock when everything else erodes like so much quicksand. An oar to help him beat back against the current.

He shuts his eyes, leans his forehead against the yellowed white wall and tries to shake the feeling, but it lingers.

The wound in his shoulder takes twice as long to close, pulls and bleeds sluggishly every time he twists to set the next stitch. Throbs with a sharp, stiff pain that ebbs and flows and drags at him like a riptide. Breathing the wrong way makes the joint twinge and spasm and lock up, and Will grits his teeth hard enough to feel air whistle through the empty space where the knife knocked loose a molar. Takes swigs from a handle of Old Crow to steady his hands and numb his pounding head, and wonders what face Hannibal would pull if he tried cleaning the wound with that, too, just for kicks.

Will presses the flat of his tongue against the bloody gap in his gums, then the inside of the wound in his cheek for as long as he can stand it. Tests all his new sharp edges. He aches for something solid to lean into. Homesick, though for which home he can't quite tell. All of them, maybe, and none.

Three long years he's spent painstakingly carving himself a new oar, and he just had to go and snap it over his knee like so much rotten driftwood.

It was never really the kind of oar he needed in the first place. Not strong enough to stand up to the currents he's fighting. Feels like it slipped out of his hands weeks and weeks ago, the minute the wind started to blow due Hannibal again. It's damn hard to hold onto anything good, he muses, staring down the bottom of the bottle of bourbon. It's all so slippery. Slippery, slippery life.

It's a dismal truth of what drew him to Molly Foster in the first place, that there was no need to build a foundation to have a family, that she was already whole and complete without him. That he could slot comfortably into a borrowed space in her easy, quiet, domestic world and feel like it belonged to him, as long as he was content to leave behind the ugly, twisted parts of himself that were fundamentally incompatible with anything but the old life and the man who molded him for it. As long as he didn't slip, grasp for too much or let himself look back over his shoulder, he could live small and make space.

He let himself turn around for one foolish backwards glance and it all slipped through his fingers. Outgrew that cozy bed he so carefully pruned himself to fit and suddenly the imago of Will Graham—retired, subdued, loving husband, good father— was flattened out to

nothing more than a shadow puppet on the wall. A poor player, his brief hour on the stage all played out, nothing more to do but make his bows and vanish behind the curtain.

It was an act of mercy, snuffing the candle out.

"You were buying time," Abigail says, seated beside him on the edge of the worn mattress. Older now than she ever was, some of the wide-eyed child-softness gone from her face. She's setting shaky stitches into the open seam of her slit throat, trying to pull it closed, paying no heed to the blood that trickles past her fingers, runs in rivulets down her collarbones and traces the ridges of her knuckles. "It's okay. Sometimes that's all you can do, is delay the inevitable."

"Is that what he is?" The words slip out sandpaper-rough and half-slurred, his mouth too swollen to facilitate clear speech. "Inevitable?"

She levels him a slanted smile that says he ought to know better than to act like there's any room for doubt about that. Will sighs, and holds out the bottle so she can take it in her small blood-slick hands and toast to Hannibal Lecter.

*

The hallways are empty and most of the rooms are shuttered and dark at this hour of the night. Though no corner of the base at Quantico is ever really abandoned at any hour, always someone left burning the midnight oil. Something in the air in this place breeds a perpetual sense of urgency, like a ticking clock winding faster every hour, or the dreadful sucking drip of an iceberg melting off into an ever-swelling flood.

Will can still hear the echoes of it now. He's not on dry land just yet.

He drifts down the abandoned corridors to the lab with such a muffled tread that he's only half sure he isn't dreaming. He has half a plan or maybe less than that, but he came prepared to improvise anyway. Two guesses who's most likely to be left burning the midnight oil down here tonight, and the answer doesn't change much of anything except whether this talk is going to be easy or hard.

He gets his answer as he slinks through the frigid corridors of the morgue and hears the slightly off-key whistling echo off the white tile and cold steel. Brian usually mumbles under his breath while he works, but Jimmy whistles. Will wanders over the threshold in time to hear a tuneless rendition of Camptown Races trail off into an indistinct puzzled hum.

Fingers tap across the keys. Price's throat clicks in the silence. His face is grey-blue in the reflected light of the screen, and his eyes are wide. He runs the scan again, probably graciously assuming the result was a fluke. An easier leap of logic than to start seeing dead men walking, but he's a smart man. He'll find his footing firmly in the truth soon enough.

Behind him, cold on the slab, is the corpse Will left behind in his living room three days ago. Featureless and fire-blackened. The palimpsest scraped clean to accommodate a new identity, overwriting the body's history. But the ghost of the old text is still visible underneath Will's imperfect replica.

For men of science, truth is measured in the reliable reproduction of the same results. Evidence, patterns. Like, for example, a repeated failure to show a DNA match with the expected profile. Price's eyes are wide and white, but they go wider when the safety clicks off of the gun in Will's hand and announces his presence for him. Price spins around, and his eyebrows raise comically high in his face, like a drawbridge on pulleys.

"Jimmy," he greets, with an odd flat calm.

"Will," he breathes, lifting his hands slightly at his sides, fingers splayed wide. "I'll be damned. You...are looking pretty good for a dead man."

Will smiles, thinly, pushing past the stinging pain, sure it looks more like a grimace. "Come on. We both know I look like shit."

Curious eyes linger on the bandage taped over his face, dance over the green-purple-yellow bruises on his neck. Analyzing. Nervous, but hiding it admirably well. "You still have this poor bastard on the table beat by a country mile," he says, with a tilt of his head to indicate the corpse between them. "Must be a good story there, right?"

"Not really." Will drops the smile. He's too tired to keep it up anyway.

A bead of sweat forms at Price's hairline, and he bites his lip, more unsettled the longer Will keeps a weapon trained on him without blinking. "What, uh. What can I do for you, Will? You need me to take a look at that face? I do autopsies mostly, but I'm sure it's not so different patching up the live ones."

"I've got it covered, Jimmy, thanks," he dismisses, and steps closer. "Just wanted to stop by and clear things up. Make sure my body can get laid to rest without any unnecessary complications."

He swallows again. Pries, with a hopeful air, "Is this some secret plan you cooked up with Jack? Playing possum?"

"Jack doesn't know I'm here," Will denies, with a firm shake of his head. Jimmy looks crestfallen, and goes back to eyeing his trigger finger nervously. "Better for everyone if we keep it that way. I just... couldn't seem to get retirement to *stick*—here's hoping this angle works better." He cocks a brow. "Help me stay dead and you won't hear from me again. Promise."

Eyes dart askance between Will and the corpse on the table. "You're asking me to lie and tell Jack that this body is you?"

"You don't even have to go that far," Will eases. "Just don't tell him that it *isn't* me. Easiest thing in the world. Jack believes what he wants to believe, we both know that. Let sleeping

dogs lie, right?" Price hesitates, jaw working, and Will sighs. "I wouldn't actually say that I'm *asking*, Jimmy," he warns, softer and a half a degree colder. He pales a little more in the cold light of the screens and the flickering fluorescents, and licks his lips.

He'll listen, Will knows from the sour twist to his mouth as he blinks down the barrel. But he'll wonder what would have happened if he hadn't. Always a little curious, every time he's alone in the dark with the memory of the choice. Forever wondering if Will would really have pulled the trigger.

Will does not have to wonder. His heart beats slow and calm and steady, a stalwart indicator of his body's capacity for violence. The knowledge sits like a stone in the pit of his stomach, cold and unmoving.

Price turns, slowly, telegraphing the movement like he's half expecting to change his mind, and erases the record of the test results from the screen. "Jack's a busy man," he says. "I wouldn't bother him with something like this. Too much stress, probably bad for his heart."

Will lets out a slow breath, pulse pounding with the *tick tock tick tock drip drip drip* undercurrent of tension that thrums through the foundations of the building. "Thanks, Jimmy. I'm glad you understand." He clicks the safety back on, holstering the gun at his side.

Price smiles in dizzy relief. It reaches his eyes but still leaves him looking a little rattled and pallid. "Nothing doing," he brushes off, and then swallows again. "Hey, uh, Will. Out of curiosity, whose body *am* I looking at? If, uh, telling me means you have to kill me, I'm not actually that curious and it was a joke."

"The Great Red Dragon," Will intones, eyes shining as he takes a step back into the shadows. "Cast out into the earth, and all his angels with him."

*

It's reckless, coming here, but like the proverbial cat curiosity is an itch Will just can't seem to scratch. He wants to see it. Even Freddie Lounds missed out on her chance, and she has a goddamn pathological fixation on sneaking into events she's been expressly told to stay away from.

Which isn't to say he's feeling reckless enough to actually get out of the car. Will taps his fingers against the steering wheel in a restless drumbeat and sinks lower in his seat.

At his side, Hannibal fixes him with a slow, easy, leonine smile. Dressed somberly in a sharp black suit, fingering the wood handle of a folded umbrella. Leaning comfortably back in the passenger seat of the stolen car, watching Will with obvious amusement sparkling in his dark eyes.

Will curses the absurd specificity of his imagination, and ducks his mangled face low under the collar of his jacket.

"This is all very Tom Sawyer of you," Hannibal chirps, happily. Rain paints watercolor streaks over the windows, distorting the street outside into a wash of light and color. "Really, Will, I hardly expected you to tire of playing pirates so soon."

Will grits his teeth, and watches a figure unfold from a vehicle down the street, shield their face from the drizzle and stumble across the road into to the cemetery, heeled shoes sinking into the soil with every wavering step. "What the fuck am I doing," he murmurs, low and hoarse in his throat.

"Haunting, I believe, by the most commonplace definition of the term. Do you intend to observe the final disposition firsthand?"

"I have to see it through," he says, and it sounds weak in his own ears. "To the end. I can't walk away until—" Will's fingers tighten against the steering wheel. In the distance, a quartet of figures in uniform drift through the mist, pallbearers of a casket that holds the wrong body. He can recognize the broad plane of Jack's shoulders from here. Knows him by the way he carries the weight, like it rests easy in his arms but drags him down like an anchor around the soul.

He doesn't turn his face to Hannibal, but anticipates the sharp, cruel twist of his mouth anyway. "Poor Uncle Jack. *Instead of the cross, the Albatross about my neck was hung,*" he intones, and his eyes burn like dying stars.

Will looks away. "I can't leave it half-finished," he explains, feebly.

Hannibal clucks his tongue in disappointment. As some consolation or maybe as another punishment, he keeps his hands to himself. Will thinks he might actually bolt out of the car and start running if he imagines those hands on him right now. "Dear Will. Have we not yet outgrown this silly habit of lying to one other?"

One by one the shadows of his old life slip through the curtain of the falling rain and vanish, but he still freezes at the sight the next silhouette, a perfect reverse of his last glimpse of her. Stepping out of the dark, shutting the car door behind her and hesitating there, soft face titled up toward the open sky. Hair plastered to her neck, mouth set in a wavering line, hands deep in the pockets of her coat. If she's still wearing her wedding band, it's tucked out of sight, but Will hopes she's not. It would make him feel marginally better.

She didn't bring Walt with her. Will exhales, slowly. It makes sense. Once is enough for a kid to experience something like this. Dragging him along to bury a second father would feel too much like a last bitter attempt to supplant the first. And Will never took to feeling paternal the same way he had the first time around, gun-shy of the memory of his first foray into fatherhood blowing up in his face. Bleeding out under his shaking hands.

(*I gave you a child, if you'll recall*, Hannibal told him, with the ghost of an admonishing smile, and something roiling and dark and long buried crawled out of a pit in Will's chest, teeth bared, eyes wet, like no time had passed between them at all.)

"Bet anything you tried to write her a letter," is what he says, when the throbbing ache of his face subsides enough to let him grit out the words. Hannibal hums, noncommittal. "She won't read it. She'll burn it first. Smarter than me that way."

Molly straightens her spine and walks on into the small crowd of mourners, and Will stares at her retreating back without really seeing her.

"You wanted to see them mourn you." Hannibal lingers in the corner of his eye, twirling the umbrella in small rocking motions. "An understandable impulse, but a selfish one. You hoped to watch the world grieve the loss of a good man, so that you can put off admitting that none of them saw you half as well as you allowed them to believe. You are not dead, and you are not that good man, Will. You blinded them all, to the bitter end."

"You see me," he answers instinctively, the words carving out of him like a disemboweling, cold and razor-keen. "Whatever I am, you always see me. You—I'm not fortune's fool, I'm yours."

Hannibal says nothing to that. But then he isn't really here in the first place. Will wonders for the first time if he took the bait, too, hook line and sinker, locked away in his basement cell with a series of secondhand accounts of Will's grisly, untimely death. If he truly, miraculously has them *all* fooled. It's a strange thing to imagine. "Where will you go now?"

Will swallows, and watches the raindrops race one another over the surface of the windshield. He feels dizzyingly free, his last fraying tethers all cut. There's a sensation like floating away from himself.

"Or do you intend to hide away behind the veil of death?" Hannibal prods, and when Will turns back he can see a bright, hot hunger shining in his face. A sudden longing gleam in his eye, as if he might take Will's throat in his teeth. "I made sure that you would *always* know where to find me when you needed me, Will. Allowed you to seek me out, time and again. Will you not return the favor? Will you leave me no trail to follow?"

Flexing his white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel, Will bends double with a convulsive burst of laughter too sudden to keep in check. It rings strange in his ears, high and lonely. "Still scares the shit out of you, huh, thinking you might lose me?" He taunts, shaky. "Like I could ever get away from you in any way that matters. I made a brand new life and you broke that into so much shrapnel without even *touching* it, Hannibal, *Jesus*—"

He presses his forehead to the wheel, uncurls his fingers, catches his breath. When he straightens up again, he's alone. The rain hammers delicately against the roof, faster as the storm gathers overhead.

Running would be the smart thing to do. The *obvious* thing, but even from beyond the grave he feels irrevocably marked. Like the winds themselves would turn against him if he tried to sail to freedom. Will might have overturned Death itself, but there remain some forces of nature too great to quell. God, gravity, Hannibal Lecter.

He needs perspective. Advice, maybe, or at least a listening ear. He needs to get a goddamn grip, or he might as well jump back into the ocean now and finish what the Dragon started,

needs—

—Well. Not a friend, exactly, he thinks bitterly, as the spinning gears of his whirling thoughts catch and click. Not someone he even knows how to be civil with, really. But someone who understands.

Someone else who has been swallowed by the beast and spat out again onto dry land.

*

"Doctor Du Maurier," he greets, pleasantly, voice tinny through the cheap burner phone and disguised by its new seemingly permanent hitching rasp. "Have I caught you at a bad time?"

"I can spare it," she says, shortly, and then, "You do, however, seem to have me at a disadvantage, Mister...?"

"Lazarus," Will tells her, with a private smile. It sits cockeyed on his face, twisted down at one end by the slack muscles of his injured side. Buccal and lingual nerves twisted up in the mass of gnarled tissue that carves through his right cheek. Another scar for the collection. He's seen it in the mirror, now that the bandages are off and the stitches picked out, turning all his expressions distorted and unsettlingly foreign on his face. The tilt will probably start to look more familiar soon. If he gets the feeling and the motion back, it won't be for weeks, months, years, but the body can adapt to anything with time. "Walter Lazarus. We shook hands a while ago at one of your *fascinating* talks, just briefly. Riveting stuff. Macabre."

"Thank you," Bedelia hums, and from the thin sound he can envision her lips pursed in annoyance.

"A hell of a story, I thought. Hard to believe you really lived it."

A soft, flat sigh. "How can I help you, Mr. Lazarus?"

Will cinches tight the knot he had been tying, and drops it to the foot of the rigging. "I wanted to talk about Dante," he announces. "I assume you're familiar?"

"I am."

"You referenced the Divine Comedy in your presentation," he drawls, tucks the phone under his shoulder and watches the skyline shift with the gentle rocking of the waves. "Hannibal the Cannibal, playing your personal Virgil, offering you a guided tour through damnation. A front row seat. All the better to observe, right? So close you might be able to reach out and touch, if you wanted. Participate a little."

A beat of stony silence. "There was a block of time allotted after the talk for questions."

Will chuckles humorlessly, and sits. "I'm not asking, Doctor. *Midway upon the journey of our life I found myself within a forest dark*," he recites. "*For the straightforward pathway had been lost.* I'm not interested in learning when you stepped off the righteous road or why, I know you wouldn't feel comfortable discussing that. Trespasses are such an intimate personal affair."

Bedelia answers with another slow breath. "I believe you are deliberately trying to stoke my curiosity in what trespasses you might have made, Mr. Lazarus, but I am not sure we know one another well enough for that."

The theft of this slightly ramshackle sailboat, most recently, for a chance to hole up somewhere other than a motel room. He has no particular interest in owning up to that or any other offense, today. Will keeps his eyes on the horizon, gulls circling overhead. The particular sour effluvia of the Chesapeake Bay. "Dante stumbles on his guide while trying to make his own way out of the forest. Keeps being turned back, beset by ravenous beasts every time he tries to climb toward the light. Our lucky poet finally alights on a friendly shade to lead him safely to salvation. I wonder if he'd still be wandering in the dark, had his Virgil turned out to have an appetite like yours."

"Did you ever meet Hannibal Lecter, I wonder?" Bedelia says, coolly condescending. "If you would prefer to view him as just another of the ravenous beasts guarding the borders of hell. It's a comfortable perspective to take on when faced with such a terrible capacity for violence, I believe, to assign the perpetrator an inhuman quality. But reductive."

"Not a beast," Will says, hoarsely, a little too quickly to dismiss her line of questioning. Leaving it deliberately unanswered. "He is the dark forest. Where the sun is silent and wayward sinners wander in eternal fear. No one gets out alive."

Doctor Du Maurier makes a quiet sound in her throat. A little trill like a laugh. "Maybe you did meet him," she amends.

"Except you," Will continues, and clenches his teeth. "No one gets out alive, except you."

She sits in that accusation for a moment, mulling it over. "You perceive me as having achieved a kind of freedom that still eludes you."

"I don't," he says, biting cold, a flicker of a growl creeping into the words. "No. I, uh, wondered. How confident are you that you're really out of the woods?"

"I wonder what it is you have trouble freeing yourself from," she says, clipped and quiet. "Who, perhaps, is the better question."

"Look over your shoulder, Doctor," he tells her, shutting his eyes, sucking in a breath. "Do you still see the treeline from here? Will you ever be far enough away that you can say, with absolute confidence, that you were the lucky one who got away unscathed?"

"Hannibal Lecter casts a long shadow," Bedelia says, and Will can hear the distant sound of a glass bottle set down sharply on the surface of a desk. "But he does not have a great deal of

agency left in the world, Mr. Lazarus. Less even than he might have had this time a month ago. And he never will again. I sleep more or less soundly at night these days, I assure you."

The waves wash the hull of his stolen boat, and Will leans with the tilt of the ballast. His eyes fall open, flickering in uncertainty. "A month ago?"

In the background, a glass poured, fuller than the vintage probably warrants. Will wonders if she's drinking red or white. "You seem to have reached your own conclusions about whether my role can be better described as an observer or a participant. Truly, Hannibal had little regard for me in either capacity. He had no great need for an audience, or an accomplice. He wanted a companion in all things. Someone willing, if we are to circle back again to Dante, to eat his burning heart out of Love's hand. I did not have the appetite. There was another who, in my estimation, *did* feel that stab of hunger—however he might try to hide it—but he has recently passed. And with him, I believe, flew Hannibal Lecter's last hope." Will hears his heartbeat thundering in his ears as she sips her wine, languid. "A sad thought, if you are of the disposition to cultivate sympathy for the devil."

The tilt of the boat on the waves is getting to Will's head, making him dizzy, or he just can't seem to shake the echoing refrains of *Love Love Love* from the cavern of his skull. The word reverberates with a deafening volume.

"I don't," he says, numbly, only half sure what the words are a response to, but the taste of them on his tongue is cloying and bitter with falsehood. "I'm not."

Bedelia drinks her wine, and does not speak. Will's face sinks into his open palm, and he shudders, trembles, wants to sink his teeth into something so badly he feels himself swallowing thickly around the impulse. Aching, hollowed out by wanting. Buzzing with a simmering anger, beneath that.

"You're mistaken, Dr. Du Maurier," he grits out, chokes on the first syllable of "Han—" He's kept the name out of his mouth so far, knows that the timbre of his voice shaping such a familiar sound would give him away in an instant. But he's more than ready, suddenly, to throw back the veil. "Hannibal's last hope is coming home to roost."

The next beat of silence on the line is fraught, breathless. Cold with creeping horror. Will licks his lips. "No," she whispers, clutching tight to her glass and the phone pressed to her ear. Eyes widening. "You are supposed to be *dead*—"

"Oh, we both are, Bedelia," Will tells her, with a growl, pitching forward and resting his forearms against his knees. "We are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, and all roads lead us right back to where we started. That's our divine punishment, yours and mine. We don't get to walk away. You chose this, when you stepped off the path. You played the game."

She curses him out, loud and shocky as the tethers of her cool, prim professional demeanor finally snap under the strain. Will laughs.

"Payment's coming due," he finishes. "You can start running now, if there's any point."

Bedelia ends the call in a fit of pique, and Will shuts his eyes, lost in the ringing knell of *eat his burning heart out of Love's hand*, and the surging pangs of frantic hunger that twist his stomach in answer.

Somehow, he had not expected that.

*

The feeling stays simmering under his skin for days. Makes him restless, itching for a fight, for something to sink his teeth into.

The moon is waxing, swelling with light and potentiality, and he know he has to make a choice soon—whether to let the Dragon disappear without a trace, or to find a way to keep up the ruse one month more. How dirty he would be willing to let his hands get in the process is another consideration. Will is a killer now three times over, and he cannot go back to pretending otherwise, but there are some depths he cannot bring himself to dredge. No more Jacobis. No Leedses.

But Jack wants the Great Red Dragon, and that makes him Will's best shot to get to Hannibal. He could force some kind of exchange. Make it seem like it's worth swallowing the spider to catch the fly. There's no bait Jack Crawford, fisher of men, wouldn't string up if he thought he might get a bite.

The tack he's taken most recently is one Will could have predicted a mile off. Probably would have suggested it himself. Baiting the press with cheap taunts about fairies and troubled home lives, dressing up the profile Will drafted before he died in a flashy skirt and making it dance the Seven Veils in florid newsprint. He scrolls the Tattlecrime homepage with a frustrated sigh, and wishes somebody *would* give Freddie Lounds the attention she wants, just once. She's not worth risking the snare, not really, but Will allows himself a moment to get caught up in the toothsome fantasy of sourcing the meat for *lomo saltado* and not holding back.

He's still mulling the impulse over with a wistful kind of preoccupation when he hears the gasp over his shoulder.

Will turns and locks eyes with the man behind him, who looks like he's seen a ghost and is already plotting out the route of the haunted house tour and what price to set the tickets at.

"Oh my god, W--!"

He darts forward and all but slaps a palm over Chilton's mouth, redirecting the impulse at the last second to plant his hand firmly on his shoulder, insistently amiable. "*There* you are, Doc! Not like you to show up so late. Started to think you had stood me up for a minute there," he crows with forced casual cheer, grasping and tugging the other man into brisk step with him, turning down the next street with absolutely no idea where he's going.

God, it was stupid, coming in to Baltimore, even for a day, even for the sake of entertaining the idea that he might find himself wandering past Hannibal's former office building, reapportioned now into cheap legal offices and a mid-range salon.

He links arms with Chilton, which looks marginally better than dragging him along behind but unfortunately gives the prying asshat ample opportunity to lean in close and say, out of the corner of his mouth, his overbearing aftershave tickling Will's nose, "I went to the funeral, you know. Beautiful ceremony. You would have liked it. This is *quite* unexpected."

"Keep your voice down," Will mumbles back, and maneuvers the pair of them sideways into some hole in the wall coffeeshop.

He laughs. "Come, Will, when have you known me to be anything less than the *soul* of discretion?"

"Now, right now, is one example," he bites down, teeth gritted, and tilts his head at the menu. "Black. Two sugars. You're buying."

Chilton's eyes are mapping over the jagged scar on his cheek now, all glistening with excitement. His lips twitch in amusement as he produces his wallet. "I suppose being declared legally deceased might lead to something of a cash flow problem," he prods. Will huffs.

He glowers at the end of the bar while Chilton orders for the both of them, ducking his face low under his collar out of habit, leads the pair of them to a corner table with a sightline on the window and the front door. Keeps half an eye on Chilton's hands, monitoring for the first sign of twitching towards a pocket for his phone.

"So," he says, leaning forward over a cappuccino, fingertips dancing a patter against the table. "Here you are, back from the dead." A twinkle in his eye as he gestures to the well-disguised mark of the entry wound high on his own cheek. "It seems we match now, Mister Graham. Shall I give you the name of my esthetician?"

"You should really be hiding," Will says, wrapping his hands white-knuckle tight around his mug. "There's a full-color headshot of you on Freddie Lounds' website right next to an article you helped her write that refers to an active serial killer as an *impotent, homely lunatic*. He won't like that."

Chilton smiles wide. "Well, he's hardly meant to like it, is he? We intend to provoke a reaction. You can't coax a killer out of hiding by doing things halfway."

The urge to sink his teeth into something that tears and bleeds rises up in Will's throat again. He burns his tongue on a sip of coffee to chase it away. "You're playing with fire, Frederick."

He laughs, and brushes Will off with a wave. "Casting a few errant sparks, maybe. But you, you're in it up to the neck, aren't you? The Tooth Fairy has already tried and failed to kill you once. I imagine the chase is what has you lurking in dark corners looking so exceptionally harried. Must be difficult sorting out which of you is the hunter and which is the prey. Does it vary moment to moment?"

Will feels a little of the tension unspool from his shoulders as Chilton presents his theories with characteristic ironwrought self-assurance. No thought in his head of Will's own hands twisting the Dragon's neck until bone gave way, carving up a corpse to hide its face, running from the ravenous howling beast in his belly after it tasted blood. In Chilton's mind things are simpler. Will Graham is not a person but a living and breathing pathology. He is a chimera of quirks and neuroses, more of a fascinating curio than any kind of *danger*.

"What I want," Will says, with a sidelong glance out the window, "In this moment, more than anything in the world, is a shower. Can I use yours?"

Chilton blinks at him, and then grins wider.

He lobs questions over Will's head the whole drive, barely minding the road, hungry for any insight on the way the Tooth Fairy kills from Will's new firsthand experience. Expounds on the half-finished draft of his book, vacillating between deliberately obtuse jargon and pedantic condescension. Will answers a few of the prompts gruffly, but his thoughts bend in a different direction.

Jack has, at least, done the due diligence of putting Chilton up at a hotel under a false name, one degree removed from being left completely at the mercy of the killer he has been used to bait. Freddie likely has a safehouse and an armed round the clock security detail.

All wasted funding, of course, because the Great Red Dragon is rotting in the ground under a headstone inscribed with Will's name, and Will is here, shadowing Frederick Chilton into the room and drawing the bolt behind him. Half of him waiting on tenterhooks, watching the other half, curious to see what he'll do.

"—it's the teeth I'm curious about, I have to say," Chilton is saying, gesticulating with excitement. "Such a unique impression, so unnaturally sharp and jagged. It captures the imagination. It suggests an oral fixation, doesn't it? Or else I am reminded of the mouth as the seat of the throat chakra, in which case the distorted focus on the area indicates a blockage in the ability to communicate verbally. A stutter or a lisp, maybe—"

"False teeth," Will says absently. He feels a distant pang of disappointment to slip a hand into his pocket and find them missing. His searching fingers light on something else, though, and grasp tight, flex against cold metal.

"Fascinating," Chilton croons. "There's room for a chapter on costume as an expression of identity, to assist in the division and cohesion of a split personality..."

Will clicks the safety off in time with the rattling slide of a side table drawer as he dives for a notebook to jot down the flash of insight. He feels the air move over his skin in a slow drag, every hair standing on end. Takes a breath and feels the oxygen burn through his blood, searing hot.

Chilton looks up from his notebook, and his brows draw together in a neat crease, sensing the strange shift of tension. "Is something the matter, Mister Graham?"

An indistinct shape that feels like Hannibal's shadow looms over Will's shoulder, whispering breath against the shell of his ear, steady hands brushing his waist, the points of his antlers scraping his temple as he leans close, closer, like he might melt into his skin. Just wash over him, slip inside and amalgamate. Will imagines it would feel hot and dizzy, like a rush of blood to the head. He wants that oneness like the air in his lungs.

"Nothing personal," he says, and raises the silenced pistol to shoot Chilton in the head.

*

The antique mahjong set goes missing from the dusty shelves of a pawn shop in Edgewater, which has never kept strict enough inventory to report the theft through any channel which the FBI can monitor.

Only one tile resurfaces, tucked neatly into a manila envelope along with a severed tongue left in the postal drop box of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The pen used to scribe the address, the envelope, and the tongue all recently belonged to Dr. Frederick Chilton. The tile is, of course, a Red Dragon.

On the underside of the flap of the envelope, tucked into one corner like an afterthought, there is a hastily penned doodle of a teacup. Investigators never determine whether this absentminded scrawl holds any particular message, and as more pertinent inquiries are pursued the question falls by the wayside.

Room service finds the body the next morning, propped against the headboard, his mouth lolling open around a shard of broken glass.

*

When he gets back to his boat, there's a woman with a loaded rifle waiting for him in the galley.

Will pauses halfway down the ladder, lets out a breathy whistle of a laugh, and shakes his head with something like fondness.

"You stuck close by," he says, and stumbles past her to toss his leather jacket onto the fold-out bed and stretch. "Ever think about giving it up and settling down somewhere? Open up a coffeeshop, go on dates, pick up a hobby." He kicks open the minifridge, retrieves a beer and pops the lid off with the jagged fulcrum of the edge of the counter. Turns to Chiyoh and raises an eyebrow. "Ballroom dance, mountain biking, cross stitching? Learn to play the guitar?"

She keeps the gun trained on him, and sighs. "The world would be a much less complicated place if you had stayed dead."

"But less interesting," he parries, with a grin. Her eyes flicker to the unmoving side of his mouth, and narrow. "Didn't you ever want to move on? Free yourself from Hannibal, start over?"

"Why didn't you?"

"I tried," Will groans, and drains the rest of the beer, sets the bottle down and watches it slide across the counter with the gentle pitch of the hull. "He came back like a bad penny with a bodycount. I'm considering throwing in the towel just to minimize collateral damage."

Chiyoh drops the rifle to her side, and seats herself on the fold-out bed when Will gestures magnanimously in its direction. Her fingers twitch restlessly against the wool blend of her coat. "Is it still violence, the force that draws you back to Hannibal? Or have you considered that there may be other means of influence at play?"

A rush of blood to the head. A bleeding and blurring at the edges. Looking in the mirror and seeing Hannibal's face overlaid with his, closing his eyes and hearing Hannibal's voice in his head. There is a word for that, but he doesn't say it.

He watches her instead, reads an answer in her lovely face. "It's kinship, for you. Loyalty. He's the only family you have left, and you look out for family."

"But you abandon yours."

Will turns his back to her and drops his empty bottle in a bin under the sink. "So I don't understand loyalty," he agrees, flatly. "What else?"

"Not pity, I think," Chiyoh lists, in a soft voice. "Hannibal would not accept that, even from *nakama*."

An incredulous bubble of laughter spills out of Will's throat at the thought. "No. Uh, not. Not that, no."

He pulls another beer from the fridge to extend to his guest, but she looks at the bottle in distaste. A reaction he more or less expected, but he doesn't keep his hideaway well-stocked enough to play the gracious host any better than that.

"He told me that you understand him," she says, watching him with a kind of sharp-eyed focus that makes him think of a bird of prey. A hawk, maybe, the red scarf at her throat a burst of bright plumage against her dark pinion feathers. "But you can understand anyone. There is no reason Hannibal should be set apart."

Will brings a hand up to clutch at the edge of the counter. Glimpses the blood drying in the furrows of his cuticles. "It's more than that," he justifies. "I see him. I know him. He makes me more myself than anyone I've ever known." Something else tags along in the wake of his

words, forces its way out through his teeth before he can bite down on the sound. "It's love. My new means of influence."

Her brows arch up in surprise, either at the content of the admission or his willingness to voice it. "I am not sure you understand love as well as you understand violence."

"Does Hannibal?" He runs the tap and scrubs a little of the red from under his nails. "They're not so different, in a way," Will muses. "Love and violence. The words have started to blur together in my head. Tangled up like string. I tug on one and the other drags along behind it. I don't know if they can be separated again." He chances a glance back at her over one shoulder. "Did you come here to shoot me?"

Chiyoh watches his hands, the sediment pooling in the water while he scrubs. "He's my family," she echoes. "I'm his protector, if the need arises."

Will grimaces. "Alana Bloom's his protector," he corrects. "You're doing the same thing you did before. Keeping vigil over a prisoner Hannibal caged for you to see what you'll do."

"I think the both of us are much more concerned with asking what *you'll* do, Will Graham." She stands and crosses over to him, reaches for one of his hands and takes it gently by the wrist, examining the forensic evidence lingering in the creases of his skin. "Was it love that made you draw the knife on him?"

Her touch is as soft and careful as it was the moment before she shoved him off a moving train. Will wonders how she would attempt to recreate the action here, if pushed. Scuttle the boat and sink them both in the harbor, maybe. "That was different. That was forgiveness. This—the love has always been there, winding around everything else. I didn't know how to see it for a long time."

Chiyoh purses her lips, and lets go of his hand. "You have a plan. Tell me."

He leans back against the counter and quirks an eyebrow. "Same as last time. I'm going to free your prisoner from his cage. How you react is up to you, but I hoped we could work together. It might make things easier, if you can trust me as far as you can throw me. Threw me pretty damn far back in Italy, if I remember correctly. I bounced when I hit the ground."

A soft, slightly melodic sigh slips from her mouth. "I would be more amenable to trust if I could not sense you holding back the part of the plan you think I will not like."

Up to now, it had been more of a flight of fancy than a real idea, but the thought crystallizes in his mind so beautifully now, with Chiyoh watching warily. Will steps away, and retrieves the video camera on the leather strap that had been tucked away in his coat. "Hannibal's going to walk free, but there's something else I have to do to make it stick."

Chiyoh gives him a blank look with a subtle undertone of annoyance, probably because there's a smile playing over the side of his mouth that still moves.

Will savors the revelation, lets it melt on the back of his tongue and bloom. It tastes like earth and iron. "I have to kill him."

*

Hannibal wakes still reaching, lurching upright with the reflex though it makes his head spin and his limbs move sluggish and awkward. Hands catch at his shoulders, press him back down, and he bucks under the restraint until he registers the low, steady refrain of *hey, hey, easy, easy, it's me, it's only me*— spoken in a hum that slides over his skin like silk.

"Will," is all he cares to reply, the word coming out chafed and raw through his parched throat, rasping over his dry tongue. He curls his fingers into whatever cloth he can catch and pulls, takes a shaky breath. "Will, Will—"

His eyes slide open—he did not quite realize they were closed in the first place, all his senses too overwhelmed to take a proper inventory—and the face swims into view, hovering over him like a mirage. Eyes dark and swirling like the sea, droplets of blood bright as garnets painted over his skin, caught in stubble, shining red at the swell of his lip. A new, unfamiliar mark carved into the surface of his face, striating the marble of his cheek, pulling one corner of his mouth down flat as the other quirks up in a fond smile.

"Hannibal," Will says, and his voice is a little hoarser than he remembers.

Hannibal keeps one hand gripping the collar of his shirt as the other seeks out the hollow of his throat, searching, against all reason, for the ugly line of the gash he so vividly imagined opening there. He finds nothing but the rasp of stubble, the sharp bones of his jaw, the thrum of his pulse and the shudder that rocks through Will's whole body as Hannibal's hand wraps around his neck.

Hannibal stills, lingers there, and Will moves closer of his own accord, leans down and presses his forehead to Hannibal's, damp curls stuck to skin. His eyes fall shut, and he revels hopelessly in the miracle of breath shared between them, in-out-in-out like his heart only beats in answer to the countermelody of Will's pulse.

It's impossible to envision a world outside of that feeling while caught in the tide of its passing, and so Hannibal drowns gladly in the fathoms of his stolen moment of joy, and does not question how he came to earn it until Will pulls away again, shifting his weight from Hannibal's chest.

His fingers are nerveless in the receding stupor, so his grip loosens easily to let Will slip away. Hannibal opens his eyes and cannot place the room he is in further than the sensation of floating, shifting occasionally like the world is listing slowly to either side. A boat, he decides, gradually. Ferrying the pair of them across the Styx together.

He tilts his head to find Will's face again, and keeps it in the center of his field of vision, determined to have the sight of him as long as he can keep it. "You cannot be real," he says, wavering.

"Can't I?" Will is slouched forward on a narrow bench that mirrors the one Hannibal has been laid across. Still dressed in the same dark clothing he wore to the ambush at the cliff house, blood and sweat drying in his hair. He favors the ribs Hannibal vaguely remembers scraping with the corkscrew, but more than that his shoulders are tense and his face is drawn like he has done nothing for hours but keep vigil in this same position, silent, rocking with the tilt of the cabin. The first angel ever to watch over him as he slept, and very likely the last.

It's very disorienting, when Hannibal has spent so many weeks now fixated on the howling emptiness of a world without Will Graham in it, to see him sitting here as if he never left. Enacting once again his unique and peculiar defiance of the path of the arrow of time. Winding the clock backwards and piecing together the fallen shards with clever hands. A true entropy reversal. Hannibal contemplates him with quiet awe.

"Hannibal," he says again, probing, a furrow in his brow. Flinches away a little, like he used to in their new acquaintance, as if the threat of an outside gaze unsettles him. "A picture would last longer," he grumbles. The scarred side of his face tucks under the collar of his jacket, almost automatically.

Hannibal's fingers twitch with the urge to reach out and touch, but Will pulled away first and he is only half certain the solidity of his flesh will not melt away like a trick of the light. "Forgive me," he demurs. "The last picture I saw of you was not to my taste."

Something untangles a little in the snarl of Will's face, and he looks thoughtful. "The Dragon," he says. "I changed him, and he changed me right back. It *hurt*. The worst kind of ache. Burning me up from the inside out. Splitting open my *skin* and crawling out of it. I h— had to leave behind the cocoon. Give them something to bury."

He can almost picture the rapturous ecstasy of Will triumphant, black blood shining on his knuckles, the wide golden eye of the moon bearing witness to his apotheosis from high above. Hannibal hangs off every word and swallows, transfixed. "I wish I could have seen it."

Will's eyes dart to his again. "I was so angry with you. Still am, honestly. My fucking *family*, Hannibal, you tried to *execute* my wife and son because you still can't take the thought of me having anyone in my life who isn't you. Fuck you for that. Should have left them out of it."

His righteous anger is, of course, no kind of deterrent, so bright and beautiful Hannibal could choke glutting himself on the sight. "Would you have me apologize?"

Will straightens, stands to his feet with a choked fragment of a laugh. "God, no, you'd be lying through your teeth. I don't think you'd know real regret if it smacked you in the face."

"I thought you were dead," Hannibal says, sandpaper-rough, pulling himself upright and ignoring the spots that dance in his vision with the abrupt motion. "I was unforgivably careless with your life, and as punishment for my foolishness it was torn from me, and I was left empty-handed. I lost you, Will. I regretted that very much."

There is silence, and the rocking of the waves beneath their feet. Will exhales, ragged, and sneers. "Fumbled your teacup, Dr. Lecter? Broke your favorite toy?"

Hannibal takes the sting of the insult with a bracing gasp of relief. He presses his lips together and feels the cold shock of a tear escaping the corner of his eye, and then another. Sinks back on the bench, hands curled into fists. "You must know I hold you in greater regard than that."

"Oh, *must* I?" Will growls, but he turns back on his heel, stumbles the few steps of distance that separate him from Hannibal and throws himself bodily against his chest, grasping firmly at the collar of his shirt and pressing their lips together, fiery and furious.

Hannibal shudders and goes still, a slightly strangled noise slipping between his teeth. After a stunned moment, and then another, he at last summons the presence of mind to let his eyes fall shut and surrender to the embrace. Will's mouth tastes like blood and heat.

He clambers closer, straddling his lap, twining fingers into his hair and drawing Hannibal's tongue between his teeth to suck insistently. One or the other of them makes a needy sound that rings in the air, a harsh panting whine.

"God," Will whispers, and drags his teeth over Hannibal's lip hard enough to draw blood. His grasp on the nape of Hannibal's neck is bruisingly tight.

"Will," he replies, with matched fervor. Clasps a hand to his jaw, traces a thumb over the twisting pink line of the scar. Wants to dig his fingers in, feel it from the inside like Saint Thomas probing the wounds of Christ. "I did not think I would ever have this."

He wraps more hair between his fingers and twists, wrenches another searing kiss from Hannibal's gasping mouth and then groans, roughly.

"Shut up," he hisses, lips hot on Hannibal's throat. "Shut up, when I feel like forgiving you I'll dig your heart out of your chest and eat it."

Hannibal comes very close to a swoon, at that, and certainly does capitulate to an eager shudder, shaky and overcome. "With your hands, Will, please—"

"Christ." Will's fingers slip under the hem of his bloodstained sweater, scorching with every whisper of a touch. He bears down harder into Hannibal's lap, must be able to feel how strongly he is affected. Aroused. Much sooner than should reasonably be possible, with the aftereffects of the sedative still clouding his blood. Will's fingertips scrape over his abdomen, trace the cage of his lower ribs, and a voracious light shines in his face before it tucks against Hannibal's neck. "You'd do anything for me, wouldn't you?" He says, with soft wonder. "Promise me anything I wanted."

Half of Hannibal balks at the ridiculous presumption as the other half keens with pleasure, tips his head back to bare his throat to Will's teeth. Tries to imagine denying him, and finds it impossibly harder to fathom than the thought of killing him outright. "Only name it," Hannibal whispers, "You will have anything I can give." Will laughs.

"I knew it," he says, sucks a bruise over his jugular that leaves a lingering sharp throb. Traces a line from the edge of a rib to the jut of the hip opposite, eviscerating him with a caress. Hannibal feels the muscles of his abdomen tighten and his cock fill faster in response. "I

turned you down," Will goes on, teeth rasping against his jaw. "And you turned yourself in. Trussed yourself up on a silver platter. Gift wrapped and waiting in a pretty gilded cage. For *me*, Hannibal."

Hannibal pulls away, throat clicking, frozen in surprise. "Yes."

He cranes his head to look Will in the face again, and sees the same hunger shining there. His eyes are dark with it, and his mouth is crimson and bruised. His tongue darts out to wet his lips, and one side of his mouth twists up in a wolflike grin. "I'm just taking you up on your offer, then. Your freedom is mine now," he rasps. "To give or take. And I'm taking you. Alana and Jack are never getting you back."

"Nor should they," Hannibal agrees, and presses his thumb to the shallow wound he opened in Will's side, feels blood well up at his touch. Will hisses and his eyes flutter shut, head dropping to Hannibal's shoulder. "I'm yours, clever boy. Only yours."

"Good." Will's hand fumbles at the button of his slacks, pushes the zipper down and cups him through his briefs, nearly casual, like it's the hundredth time he's done it and not the first. The breath catches in Hannibal's chest, and releases a moment later accompanied with a heartfelt groan. "Good. Mine."

"Will," Hannibal echoes, the word coming out nearly a sob. "Please—"

He strokes the line of Hannibal's hardness through the cotton, traces out the shape of him, exploratory or teasing or both in equal measure. Touch in any capacity is almost too overwhelming to bear after going so long without, Will's touch doubly so, but this is a particular kind of torture, utterly sadistic in how quickly the soft pressure makes him throb with need. Beads of fluid leak from the head and dampen the thin cloth, and Will swipes his thumb against the wet spot with interest. Hannibal tries to tilt his hips up, chasing the contact, and Will presses him back down with a knee and a warning flash of teeth.

Hannibal swallows the urge to go on begging, and Will hums against his cheek, quietly pleased, listening to the uneven rhythm of his strained breaths. "Bedelia thinks I'm in love with you, you know," he says, goading, as he continues to stroke Hannibal slowly through the cotton. His briefs will be quite ruined soon, which he suspects may be the point.

Hannibal registers her name in a dizzy haze, and then dismisses it entirely as the word *love* trips a switch in his brain that leaves him trembling. "Oh."

"Or maybe she meant it the other way around. That you love me," Will accuses, with a fond sigh, and squeezes him more firmly. He licks incongruously at Hannibal's earlobe, and then bites it. "All true, obviously, but I hadn't put the pieces together until she said it. She's so *fucking* insufferable when she knows something I don't. Will you kill her for me, Hannibal?"

He pitches his voice into a gentle mockery of supplication, tilts one eyebrow and watches him, expectant, hand wrapped innocently around his cock.

Hannibal registers the question a second late, blinking in shock and arousal, breathing hard. "*Will.*"

Will leans closer, and his breath fans across Hannibal's cheek. "Please?"

Hannibal's head falls back against the side of the hull, and he swallows hard, feeling taut as a bowstring, Will's entreaty humming sweetly up and down his spine. "Anything," he repeats, jaw tight, mouth dry as bone. "Anything you want, Will."

Will rubs an exquisite, agonizing circle against his frenulum, and then stills, wavers like he might pull his hand away entirely. "Say yes."

An utterly foreign hitching sound burbles between his clenched teeth, and Hannibal wraps his fingers around Will's wrist, holding him in place. "Yes," he says, harshly. "Yes, of course, yes —"

Will curses under his breath, eyes flashing, and tugs him out of his briefs. He springs free and sits full and heavy in the thatch of hair between his thighs, dark and glistening with arousal. A wanton drop of precome slides over the head to fall against his stomach. Hannibal feels his face growing equally flushed as Will sits back, spits into his own palm, and wraps his hand tight around Hannibal's length, tugging in a slick, hot slide.

Further entirely undignified noises slip out entirely without his conscious assent, a series of short moans caught halfway between a sigh and a whimper. He has never before considered himself a particularly vocal lover, but then most of his past encounters have been fundamentally operating within a kind of performance that eludes him now. He is stripped quite entirely bare before Will, clutching at him as if he might disappear, reduced to wordless begging with every straining muscle in his body. Helpless to do aught but defer to Will the pleasure of deciding how tight, how rough, how fast or slow, how soon it ends and in what manner. Giving Hannibal his penance.

Characteristically, it seems Will is still deciding what he will do. He watches Hannibal with a howling, hungry look as he brings him off, face flushed and eyes glazed with wanting, but there is a calculation buried beneath it. A beautifully capricious mien. He looks as ready to make Hannibal see stars as pin him down and strangle the life out of him, or pull away and leave him hollow and wanting. He swallows thickly as he speeds the pace of his strokes, and at last leans forward and presses his forearm against Hannibal's sternum, holding him fast.

"Hannibal," he says, hoarse and crackling-warm, pressing a kiss to his panting mouth. "Come for me, C'mon—"

Anything you want, he means to say again, but he can't find the breath for it, only groan and spill into Will's hand, paint his stomach and his chest with the eager jerking spatters of it. Will strokes him through and past his climax, until he passes the precipice of pleasure and tumbles into an overstimulated raw ache. Every nerve in his body buzzes and thrums, well-used, and another harsh cracking moan slips past his clenched teeth.

After a drawn-out beat of harsh treatment, Will relents, lets him go but keeps his weight planted against Hannibal's chest. His breathing is rough and quick, and his eyes are black as pitch. "Is it everything you hoped for?" Hannibal asks, between sucking breaths that carry the scent of blood and arousal deep into his heaving lungs. "Your reckoning?"

Will growls, and presses forward until Hannibal's skull meets the wall again, thrusts his tongue hungrily into Hannibal's mouth, and then draws back to replace it with the pad of his thumb, slick with release. "Not *yet*."

Hannibal swallows around the salty taste of himself, and smiles faintly at Will's enmity.

He flexes his numb fingers in the fabric of Will's shirt, hopelessly wrinkled now in his fervent grip, and traces a hand along his side, reaches up with the other to catch a curl pasted to his forehead and twirl it around one finger. "Will," he demurs, looking through half-lidded eyes. "Let me."

Intuitive, clever, lovely Will knows him well enough to guess at his meaning, and releases his hold, backs away and stands to his feet, palm pressing faintly to the swell of his own arousal. Hannibal's tongue darts out to wet his lips.

"Fine," Will says, flatly, but his eyes are as ravenous as ever. "Get on your knees."

The cabin of the little boat shifts and sways underfoot, and Hannibal would be hard pressed to do much more strenuous than make his way from the bench to the floor, weak-kneed and lightheaded. Will is as much a vision from this angle as any other.

His eyes flit over Hannibal's upturned face with an air of affected disinterest that kindles a new fire in Hannibal's stomach. Fingers his belt idly, unbuckles it and slides the leather through the loops with the same nonchalance. Unfastens his trousers and takes himself out, unhurried. Aloof the way that God is, apathetic to everything that fails to match up to the jubilation of creation or destruction.

Hannibal parts his lips before him, an eager supplicant.

Will traces a hand over his brow, brushes his hair back, and pushes the head of his cock into his waiting mouth. "I want to fuck your throat," he says, nonchalance betrayed by the wavering strain in his voice and the high flush in his cheeks. "I want you to let me."

Hannibal sucks, laves the head with his tongue, and draws back only a moment to say, "Yes."

"Fuck." He fists his fingers tight in Hannibal's hair and drives in farther, slow but inexorable. Groans high and lovely when he fills Hannibal's mouth to the back of his throat, and then a little farther. "God, fuck, so *deep*, Hannibal—"

He draws back and drives in again, harsh and quick, and Hannibal cannot entirely supplant the reflex to choke helplessly around the intrusion, but he holds to his promise.

Will uses him just as well this way as he had before, beautifully selfish, formidable and ever so slightly vengeful in taking his pleasure. Hannibal lets the tide wash over him, sweep him quite away, and finds he does not crave air in his lungs half as badly as he wants only this, eternal and unending.

Time slips by in shallow thrusts that bruise his soft palate, and deeper ones that push into his throat and press his nose and cheek firm against the soft skin of Will's belly. Will holds him

in place, doing exactly as he likes with Hannibal's mouth, cursing breathlessly, alive and utterly alight with confidence and power.

"Oh," he moans, presses a thumb into the corner of Hannibal's mouth, "Oh, shit, *yes*, it's good. It's so good." His thighs flex and tense under Hannibal's grasp, and his face goes slack with rapture. "Want to goddamn...sink inside you and live there, Hannibal. Ohh."

He drives into Hannibal in quicker, sharper strokes, chasing his peak, and Hannibal's vision goes blurred. He clutches at Will's hip, draws him in close, discouraging even the notion of an idea of pulling away now.

"Fu-uck," he chokes out, desperately, and then a mangled groan that rings of Hannibal's name, and his head falls back as he comes, trembling, into his throat and over his tongue. Hannibal takes what he is given with greedy abandon, and thinks *Hoc est enim corpus meum* again with wild, infatuated joy.

Will shudders, withdraws and slides his hands from Hannibal's face to circle his neck, flexing like he might grip tighter and crush. Not yet satisfied. Hannibal sighs, swallows around the ache of his bruised throat, and blinks away a sheen of tears. His awareness lapses, a little, staring up at Will and waiting patiently to see if this is another part of the price he must pay. "Anything," he manages, in a thick, ruined husk of a voice. "Anything, Will."

The surging storm in Will's eyes breaks over some hidden shoal, and he makes a low, mournful noise, hands gentling on Hannibal's throat. "N-no," he folds, meets Hannibal on his knees, pressing their foreheads together a second time. "I'm not—I don't need a sacrifice," he says. "I don't. You killed me already, and I killed you. It's done. No more."

Every broken and bruised and weary inch of Hannibal goes limp, and he folds into Will's embrace, nodding in fatigued acceptance. Too tired to smile with more than a crinkling at the corners of the eyes. "Where will we go, then, to begin our new lives?"

Will kisses the question off his lips, and grins. "Anywhere. Everywhere." He shrugs. "I hadn't decided yet."

Hannibal takes a breath, and it feels like the first gasp of sunlight with the stone rolled away from the tomb. "We can decide together."

Chapter End Notes

It was going to be tender sweet reunion sex but I blinked and shit got very D/s and kind of homicidal right under my nose! What can you do! These characters love a power dynamic and so do I

LET ME expound on any more referenced material, give you my fucking fanfiction works cited lmao!!! Hannibal-as-a-figment-of-Will's-imagination is around for all of five minutes but refers to both The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (where the title character

fakes his death, runs away to play pirates with his buddy on an island in the Mississippi and then sneaks back into his own funeral) and then Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in swift succession. Fuck you Hannibal please just use your own words.

Will quotes directly from Revelations 12:9 at the end of his talk with Jimmy Price, and uses the fake name Lazarus with Bedelia to extremely unsubtly flat out tell her that he has been raised from the dead. Because he's a smug little asshole and also a self-aware Christ allegory here. The fucking lamb of god, dude,

Will and Bedelia also of course talk a lot about Dante, and the first canto of *Inferno*, and Will quotes the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow translation. They also reference the same famous portion of the first sonnet from *La Vita Nuova* which Hannibal quotes in the show but in Italian. You probably knew that well enough already I just wanted to save maybe one person a google search if I can.

ANYWAY!!! thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed! Feels very good to get this entire idea out of my head so I can move on to the new brainworms (working title Low Fantasy High Drama Revenge Quest Bodyguard AU. there's a spotify mix and everything. but i digress)

I'm on twitter and tumblr also @wastrelwoods if you want to follow this space! Happy holiday-adjacent season thanks for enjoying my blasphemous porn

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!